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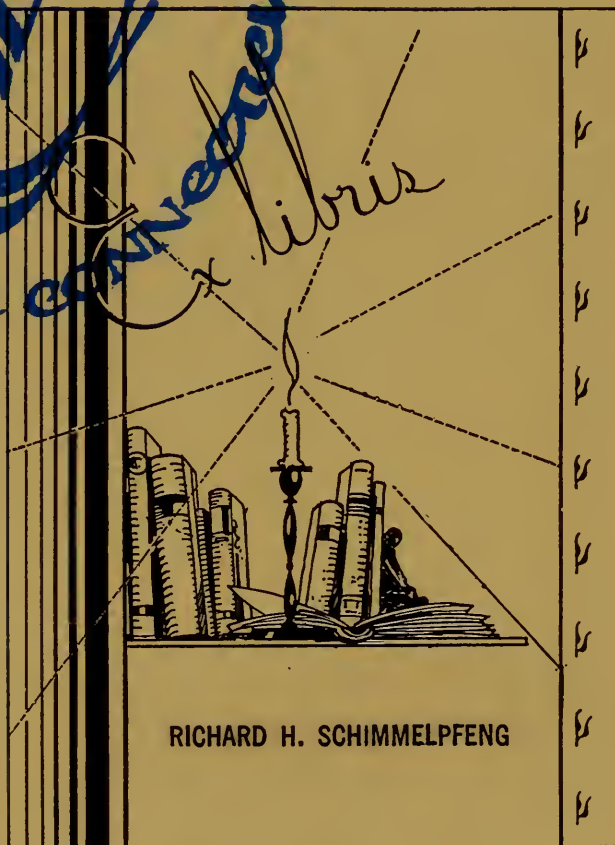
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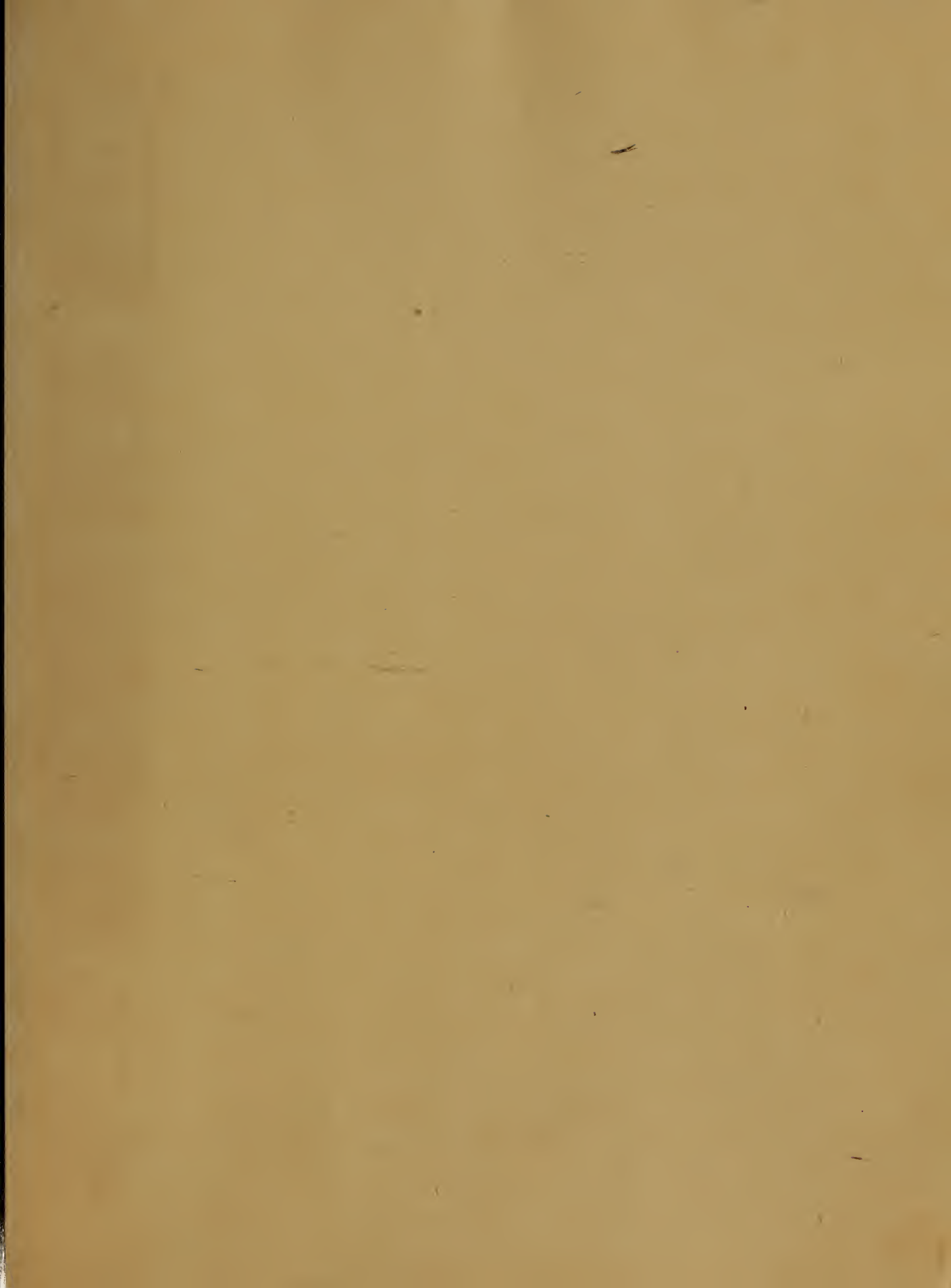


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RICHARD H. SCHIMMELPFENG



N I J I N S K Y



Portrait. Elliott & Fry, London, 1913.

NIJINSKY

AN ILLUSTRATED

MONOGRAPH

EDITED BY

PAUL MAGRIEL

HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY . NEW YORK

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1785
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FIRST PRINTING

DESIGNED BY MAURICE SERLE KAPLAN
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY QUINN & BODEN CO., INC., RAHWAY, N. J.

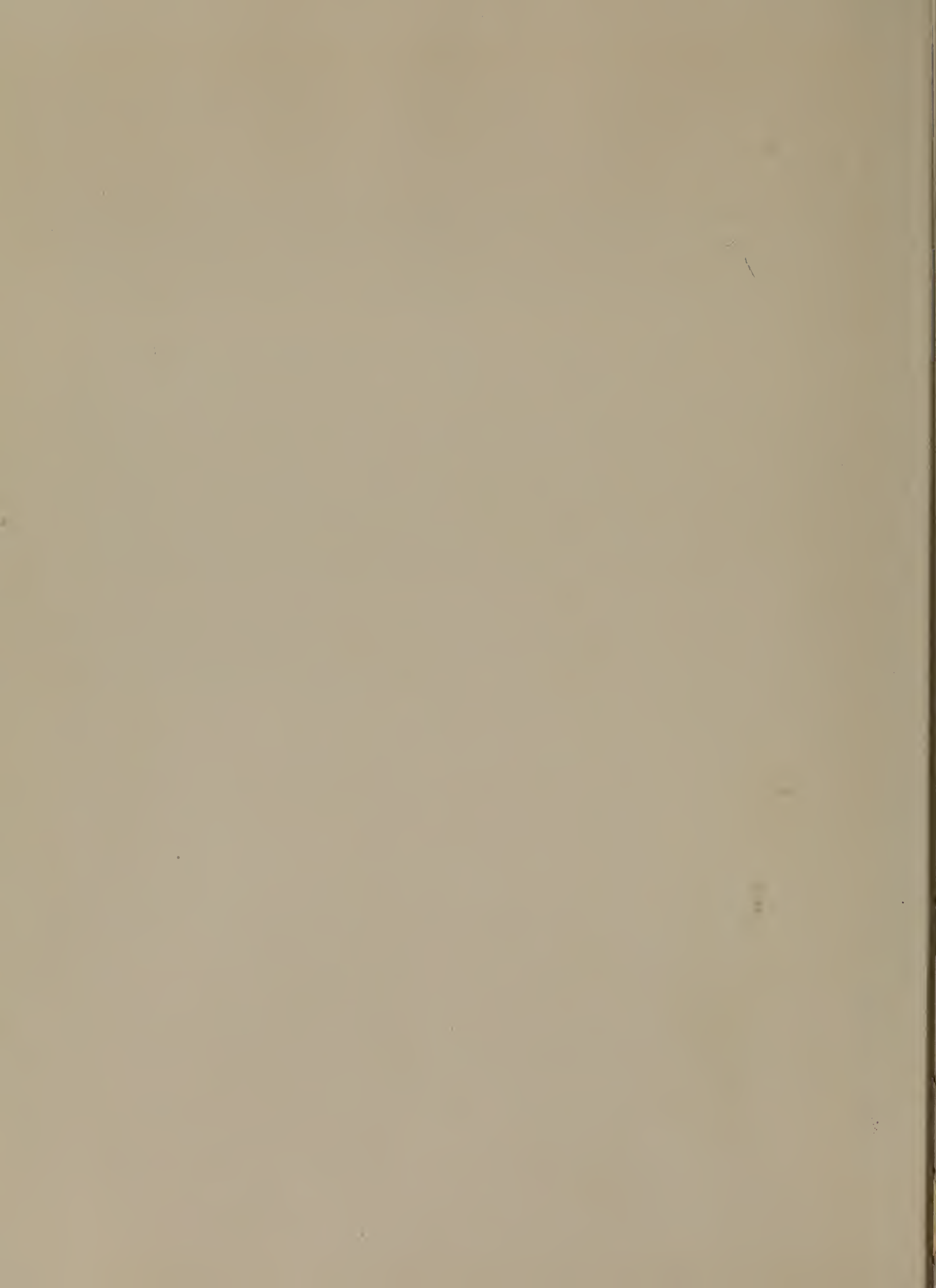
PREFACE

VASLAV NIJINSKY was the great male dancer of our era. Neither the brevity of his active career, the tragedy of his life, nor the fact that he composed only four ballets has diminished the power of his incredible personality as both dancer and choreographer. The notorious aspects of his madness have enforced his fame, but nothing has lessened his essential greatness and the tremendous fascination and interest he holds for dancers.

The writings on Nijinsky are extensive, and these with his own private diary, edited by his wife, present an exciting and moving mosaic of his life and career. The special material of which this book is composed amplifies the fact and legend of Nijinsky through critical appraisals from the viewpoint of artistic collaborator and professional critic, and perhaps even more spectacularly and accurately through the number of photographs that exist. It is unfortunate that there is no film of Nijinsky dancing, but there are these photographs which span his career from his admission to the Imperial Ballet School in Russia to the melancholy days in Swiss confinement. It is from these that there emerges a vast evidence of his extraordinary theatrical style, his peculiar and complete talent for spiritual identification with his roles, and his wonderful comprehension of balletic elegance and deportment.

This book is the first of a series of illustrated monographs on the great dancers of our time which will include, in the near future, studies of Pavlova and Isadora Duncan. Like the present volume they will consist of special essays on various aspects of their lives and careers. Also like the present work there will be a full pictorial record and a bibliography.

MAY 22 1969



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE major part of the material in this book was made available through the courtesy of *Dance Index* which I acknowledge with thanks for the following:

"The Russian Ballet and Nijinsky." Carl Van Vechten. (Reprinted from his *Interpreters*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1916.)

"Notes on Nijinsky Photographs." Edwin Denby.

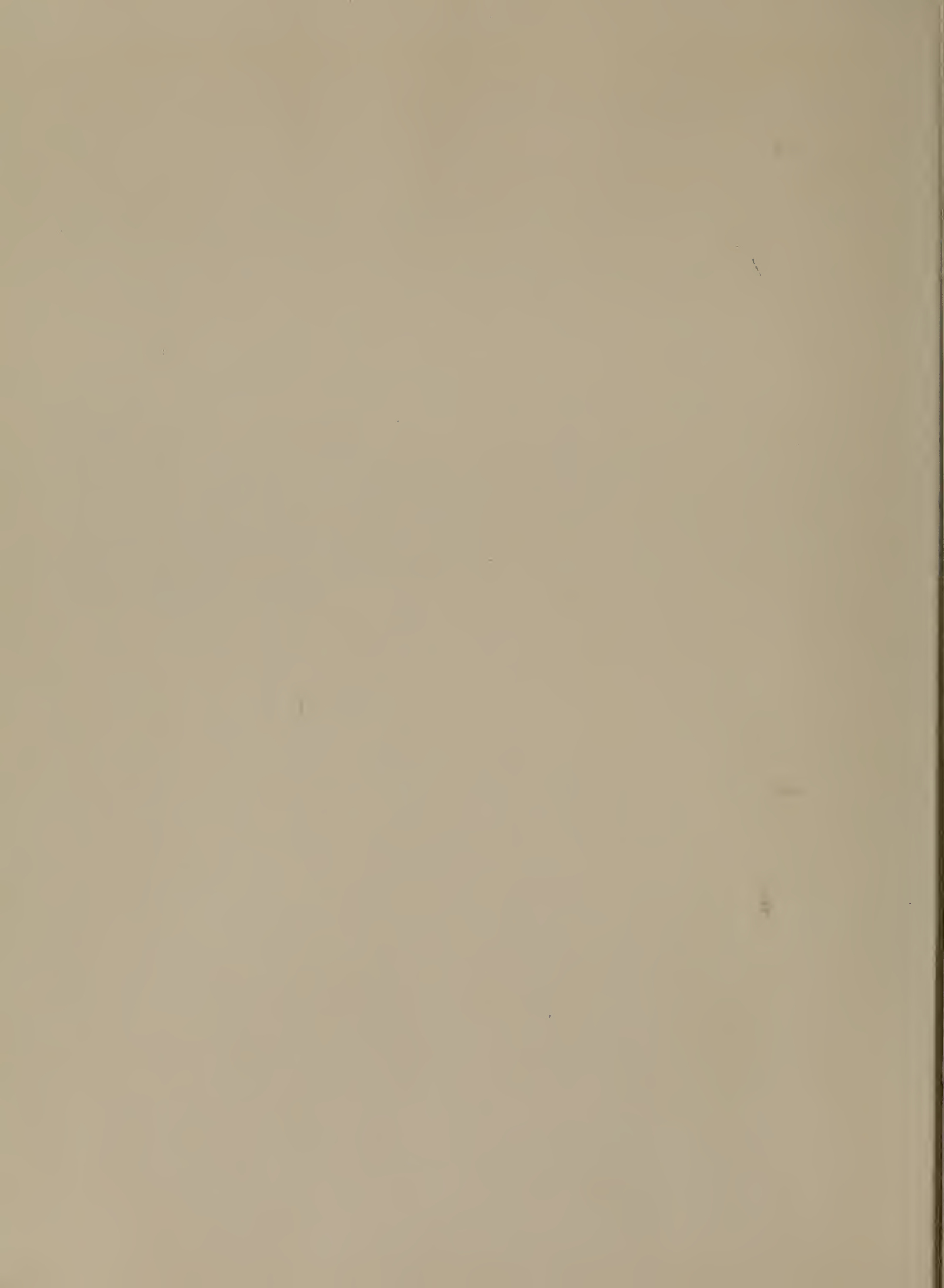
"Nijinsky and Til Eulenspiegel." Robert Edmond Jones.

"The Strangeness of Til." H. T. Parker. (First appeared in the Boston *Transcript*, 1916.)

"The Drawings of Nijinsky" by Marsden Hartley is an extract from an unpublished manuscript in the Museum of Modern Art and was made available through the courtesy of Norma Berger of the Marsden Hartley estate. Thanks are due also to the Museum of Modern Art for the photograph of the Bakst portrait and to the Kamin Dance Bookshop for the loan of the photograph of Nijinsky and his wife in their car. For other courtesies I wish to thank the Music Division, New York Public Library, Mr. George Amberg of the Dance and Theater department, Museum of Modern Art, and Mr. David Mann for the use of the photographs of Zobeide.

P. M.

N I J I N S K Y



THE RUSSIAN BALLET AND NIJINSKY

BY CARL VAN VECHTEN

SERGEI DIAGHILEV brought the dregs of the Russian Ballet to New York and, after a first greedy gulp, inspired by curiosity to get a taste of this highly advertised beverage, the public drank none too greedily. The scenery and the costumes, designed by Bakst, Roerich, Benois, and Larionov, and the music by Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchernepnine, Schumann, Borodin, Balakirev, and Stravinsky—especially Stravinsky—arrived. It was to be deplored, however, that Bakst had seen fit to replace the original décor of *Scheherazade* by a new setting in rawer colors, in which the flaming orange fairly burned into the ultramarine and green (readers of *A Rebours* will remember that des Esseintes designed a room something like this). A few of the dancers came, but of the best not a single one. Nor was Fokine, the dancer-producer, who devised the choreography for *The Firebird*, *Cléopâtre*, and *Petrouchka*, among the number, although his presence had been announced and expected. To those enthusiasts—and they included practically everyone who had seen the Ballet in its greater glory—who had prepared their friends for an overwhelmingly brilliant spectacle, overusing the phrase “a perfect union of the arts,” the early performances in January, 1916, at the Century Theatre were a great disappointment. Often had we urged that the individual played but a small part in this new and gorgeous entertainment, but now we were forced to admit that the ultimate glamour was lacking in the ensemble, which was obviously no longer the glad, gay entity it once had been.

The picture was still there, the music (not always too well played), but the interpretation was mediocre. The agile Massine could scarcely be called either a great dancer or a great mime. He had been chosen by Diaghilev for the role of Joseph in Richard Strauss's version of the Potiphar legend but, during the course of a London season carried through without the co-operation of Nijinsky, this was the only part allotted to him. In New York he inter-

preted, not without humor and with some technical skill, the incidental divertissement from Rimsky-Korsakov's opera, *The Snow Maiden*, against a vivid background by Larionov. The uninspired choreography of this ballet was also ascribed to Massine by the program, although probably in no comminatory spirit. In the small role of Eusebius in *Carnaval* and in the negligible part of the Prince in *The Firebird* he was entirely satisfactory, but it was impertinent of the Direction to assume that he would prove an adequate substitute for Nijinsky in roles to which that dancer had formerly applied his extremely finished art.

Adolph Bolm contributed his portraits of the Moor in *Petrouchka*, of Pierrot in *Carnaval*, and of the Chief Warrior in the dances from *Prince Igor*. These three roles completely express the possibilities of Bolm as a dancer or an actor, and sharply define his limitations. His other parts, Darkon in *Daphnis et Chloë*, Sadko, the Prince in *Thamar*, Amoun in *Cléopâtre*, the Slave in *Scheherazade*, and Pierrot in *Papillons*, are only variations on the three aforementioned themes. His friends often confuse his vitality and abundant energy with a sense of characterization and a skill as a dancer which he does not possess. For the most part he is content to express himself by stamping his heels and gnashing his teeth, and when, as in *Cléopâtre*, he attempts to convey a more subtle meaning to his general gesture, he is not very successful. Bolm is an interesting and useful member of the organization, but he could not make or unmake a season; nor could Gavrilov, who is really a fine dancer in his limited way, although he is unfortunately lacking in magnetism or any power of characterization.

But it was on the distaff side of the cast that the Ballet seemed pitifully undistinguished, even to those who did not remember the early Paris seasons when the roster included the names of Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, Katerina Geltzer, and Ida Rubinstein. The leading feminine dancer of the troupe when it gave its first exhibitions in New York was Xenia Maclezova, who had not, so far as my memory serves, danced in any London or Paris season of the Ballet (except for one gala performance at the Paris Opéra which preceded the American tour) unless in some very menial capacity. This dancer, like so many others, had the technique of her art at her toes' ends. Sarah Bernhardt once told a reporter that the acquirement of technique never did any harm to an artist, and if one were not an artist it was not a bad thing to have. I have forgotten how many times Mlle. Maclezova could *pirouette* without touching the toe in the air to the floor, but it was some prodigious number. She was past mistress of the *entrechat* and other mysteries of the ballet academy. Here, however, her knowledge of her art seemed to end, in the subjugation of its very mechanism. She was very nearly lacking in those qualities of grace, poetry, and imagination with which great artists are freely endowed, and although she could not actually have been

a woman of more than average weight, she often conveyed to the spectator an impression of heaviness. In such a work as *The Firebird*, she really offended the eye. Far from interpreting the ballet, she gave you an idea of how it should not be done.

Her season with the Russians was terminated in very short order, and Lydia Lopoukova, who happened to be in America, and who, indeed, had already been engaged for certain roles, was rushed into her vacant slippers. Now, Mme. Lopoukova had charm as a dancer, whatever her deficiencies in technique. In certain parts, notably as Colombine in *Carnaval*, she assumed a roguish demeanor which was very fetching. As La Ballerine in *Petrouchka*, too, she met all the requirements of the action. But in *Le Spectre de la Rose*, *Les Sylphides*, *The Firebird*, and *La Princesse Enchantée*,* she floundered hopelessly out of her element.

Tchernicheva, one of the lesser but more steadfast luminaries of the Ballet, in the roles for which she was cast, the principal Nymph in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, Echo in *Narcisse*, and the Princess in *The Firebird*, more than fulfilled her obligations to the ensemble, but her opportunities in these mimic plays were not of sufficient importance to enable her to carry the brunt of the performances on her lovely shoulders. Flore Revalles was drafted, I understand, from a French opera company. I have been told that she sings—Tosca is one of her roles—as well as she dances. That may very well be. To impressionable spectators she seemed a real *femme fatale*. Her Cléopâtre suggested to me a Parisian cocotte much more than an Egyptian queen. It would be blasphemy to compare her with Ida Rubinstein in this role—Ida Rubinstein, who was true Aubrey Beardsley! In *Thamar* and *Zobeide*, both to a great extent dancing roles, Mlle. Revalles, both as dancer and actress, was but a frail substitute for Karsavina.

The remainder of the company was adequate, but not large, and the ensemble was by no means so brilliant as those who had seen the Ballet in London or Paris might have expected. Nor in the absence of Fokine, that master of detail, were performances sufficiently rehearsed. There was, of course, explanation in plenty for this disintegration. Gradually, indeed, the Ballet as it had existed in Europe had suffered a change. Only a miracle and a fortune combined would have sufficed to hold the original company intact. It was not held intact, and the war made further inroads on its integrity. Then for the trip to America many of the dancers probably were inclined to demand double pay. Undoubtedly, Sergei Diaghilev had many more troubles than those which were celebrated in the public prints, and it must be admitted that, even with his weaker company, he gave us finer exhibitions of stage art than had previously been even the exception here.

* This was the name given that season to the Bluebird Variation from *The Sleeping Beauty*.



Nijinsky in *Les Sylphides*.

In the circumstances, however, certain pieces, which were originally produced when the company was in the flush of its first glory, should never have been presented here at all. It was not the part of reason, for example, to pitchfork on the Century stage an indifferent performance of *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, in which Nijinsky once disported himself as the favorite slave, and which, as a matter of fact, requires a company of virtuosi to make it a passable diversion. *Cléopâtre*, in its original form, with Nijinsky, Fokine, Pavlova, Ida Rubinstein, and others, hit all who saw it square between the eyes. The absurdly expurgated edition, with its inadequate cast, offered to New York was but the palest shadow of the sensuous entertainment that had aroused all Paris, from the Batignolles to the Bastille. The music, the setting, the costumes—what else was left to celebrate? The altered choreography, the deplorable interpretation, drew tears of rage from at least one pair of eyes. It was quite incomprehensible also why *The Firebird*, which depended on the grace and poetical imagination of the filmiest and most fairylike actress-dancer, should have found a place in the repertoire. It is the dancing equivalent of a coloratura soprano role in opera. Thankful, however, for the great joy of having reheard Stravinsky's wonderful score, I am willing to overlook this tactical error.

All things considered, it is small wonder that a large slice of the paying population of New York tired of the Ballet in short order. One reason for this cessation of interest was the constant repetition of ballets. In London and Paris the seasons as a rule have been shorter, and on certain evenings of the week opera has taken the place of the dance. It has been rare indeed that a single work has been repeated more than three or four times during an engagement. I have not found it stupid to listen to and look at perhaps fifteen performances of varying degrees of merit of *Petrouchka*, *Scheherazade*, *Carnaval*, and the dances from *Prince Igor*; I would rather see the Russian Ballet repeatedly, even as it existed in America, than four thousand five hundred and six Broadway plays or seventy-three operas at the Metropolitan once, but I dare say I may look upon myself as an exception.

At any rate, when the company entered upon a four weeks' engagement at the Metropolitan Opera House, included in the regular subscription season of opera, the subscribers groaned; many of them groaned aloud, and wrote letters to the management and to the newspapers. To be sure, during the tour which had followed the engagement at the Century the repertoire had been increased, but the company remained the same—until the coming of Waslaw Nijinsky.

When America was first notified of the impending visit of the Russian Ballet it was also promised that Waslaw Nijinsky and Tamara Karsavina would head the organization. It

was no fault of the American direction or of Sergei Diaghilev that they did not do so. Various excuses were advanced for the failure of Karsavina to forsake her family in Russia and to undertake the journey to the United States, but whatever the cause, there seems to remain no doubt that she refused to come. As for Nijinsky, he, with his wife, had been a prisoner in an Austrian detention camp since the beginning of the war. Wheels were set grinding, but wheels grind slowly in an epoch of international bloodshed, and it was not until March, 1916, that the Austrian ambassador at Washington was able to announce that Nijinsky had been set free.

I do not believe the coming to this country of any other celebrated person had been more widely advertised, although P. T. Barnum may have gone further in describing the charitable and vocal qualities of Jenny Lind. Nijinsky had been extravagantly praised, not only by the official press representatives but also by eminent critics and private persons, in adjectives which seemed to preclude any possibility of his living up to them. I myself had been among the paean singers. I had thrust "half-man, half-god" into print. "A flame!" cried someone. Another, "A jet of water from a fountain!" Such men in the street as had taken the trouble to consider the subject at all very likely expected the arrival of some stupendous and immortal monstrosity, a gravity-defying being with sixteen feet (at least), who bounded like a rubber ball, never touching the solid stage except at the beginning and end of the evening's performance.

Nijinsky arrived in April. Almost immediately he gave vent to one of those expressions of temperament often associated with interpretative genius, the kind of thing I have described at some length in *Music and Bad Manners*. He was not all pleased with the Ballet as he found it. Interviewed, he expressed his displeasure in the newspapers. The managers of the organization wisely remained silent, and a controversy was avoided, but the public had received a suggestion of petulance which could not contribute to the popularity of the new dancer.

Nijinsky danced for the first time in New York on the afternoon of April 12, at the Metropolitan Opera House. The pieces in which he appeared that day were *Le Spectre de la Rose* and *Petrouchka*. Some of us feared that eighteen months in a detention camp would have stamped their mark on the dancer. As a matter of fact, his connection with the Russian Ballet had been severed in 1913, a year before the war began. I can say for myself that on the occasion of his first appearance in America I was probably a good deal more nervous than Nijinsky. It would have been a cruel disappointment to me to discover that his art had deteriorated during the intervening years since I had last seen him. My fears were soon

dissipated. A few seconds after he, as the Rose Ghost, had bounded through the window, it was evident that he was in possession of all his powers; nay, more, that he had added to the refinement and polish of his style. I had called Nijinsky's dancing perfection in years gone by, because it so far surpassed that of his nearest rival; now he had surpassed himself. True artists, indeed, have a habit of accomplishing this feat. I may call to your attention the careers of Olive Fremstad, Yvette Guilbert, and Marie Tempest. Later I learned that this first impression might be relied on. Nijinsky, in sooth, has now no rivals upon the stage. One can only compare him with himself.

The Weber-Gautier dance-poem, from the very beginning until the end, when he leaps out of the girl's chamber into the night, affords this great actor-dancer one of his most grateful opportunities. It is in this very part, perhaps, which requires almost unceasing exertion for nearly twelve minutes, that Nijinsky's powers of co-ordination, mental, imaginative, muscular, are best displayed. His dancing is accomplished in that flowing line, without a break between poses and gestures, which is the despair of all novices and almost all other virtuosi. After a particularly difficult leap or toss of the legs or arms, it is a marvel to observe how, without an instant's pause to regain his poise, he rhythmically glides into the succeeding gesture. His dancing has the unbroken quality of music, the balance of great painting, the meaning of fine literature, and the emotion inherent in all these arts. There is something of transmutation in his performances; he becomes an alembic, transforming movement into a finely wrought and beautiful work of art. The dancing of Nijinsky is first an imaginative triumph, and the spectator, perhaps, should not be interested in further dissection of it, but a more intimate observer must realize that behind this the effect produced depends on his supreme command of his muscles. It is not alone the final informing and magnetized imaginative quality that most other dancers lack; it is also just this muscular co-ordination. Observe Gavrilov in the piece under discussion, in which he gives a good imitation of Nijinsky's general style, and you will see that he is unable to maintain this rhythmic continuity.

Nijinsky's achievements become all the more remarkable when one remembers that he is working with an imperfect physical medium. Away from the scene he is an insignificant figure, short and ineffective in appearance. Aside from the pert expression of his eyes, he is like a dozen other young Russians. Put him unIntroduced into a drawing room with Jacques Copeau, Orchidée, Doris Keane, Bill Haywood, the Baroness de Meyer, Paulet Thévenaz, the Marchesa Casati, Marcel Duchamp, Cathleen Nesbitt, H. G. Wells, Anna Pavlova, Rudyard Chennivière, Vladimir Rebikov, Henrie Waste, and Isadora Duncan,



Nijinsky in *Le Spectre de la Rose*. De Meyer, Paris, 1911.

and he probably would pass entirely unnoticed. On the stage it may be observed that the muscles of his legs are overdeveloped and his ankles are too large; that is, if you are in the mood for picking flaws, which most of us are not in the presence of Nijinsky in action. Here, however, stricture halts confounded; his head is set on his shoulders in a manner to give satisfaction to a great sculptor, and his torso, with its slender waistline, is quite beautiful. On the stage, Nijinsky makes of himself what he will. He can look tall or short, magnificent or ugly, fascinating or repulsive. Like all great interpretative artists, he remolds himself for his public appearances. It is under the electric light in front of the painted canvas that he becomes a personality, and that personality is governed only by the scenario of the ballet he is representing.

From the day of Nijinsky's arrival, the ensemble of the ballet improved; somewhat of the spontaneity of the European performances was regained; a good deal of the glamour was recaptured; the loose lines were gathered taut, and the choreography of Fokine (Nijinsky is a director as well as a dancer) was restored to some of its former power. He appeared in nine roles in New York during the two short seasons in which he was seen with the Russian Ballet here; the Slave in *Scheherazade*, Petrouchka, the Rose Ghost, the Faun, the Harlequin in *Carnaval*, Narcisse, Til Eulenspiegel, and the principal male roles of *La Princesse Enchantée* and *Les Sylphides*. To enjoy the art of Nijinsky completely, to fully appreciate his genius, it is necessary not only to see him in a variety of parts, but also to see him in the same role many times.

Study the detail of his performance in *Scheherazade*, for example. Its precision alone is noteworthy. Indeed, precision is a quality we see exposed so seldom in the theater that when we find it we are almost inclined to hail it as genius. The role of the Slave in this ballet is perhaps Nijinsky's scenic masterpiece—exotic eroticism expressed in so high a key that its very existence seems incredible on our puritanic stage, and yet with such great art (the artist always expresses himself with beauty) that the intention is softened by the execution. Before the arrival of this dancer, *Scheherazade* had become a police-court scandal. There had been talk of a "Jim Crow" performance in which the blacks were to be separated from the whites in the harem, and I am told that our provincial police magistrates even wished to replace the "mattresses"—so were the divans of the sultanas described in court—by rocking chairs! But to the considerably more vivid *Scheherazade* of Nijinsky no exception was taken. This strange, curious, head-wagging, simian creature, scarce human, wriggled through the play, leaving a long streak of lust and terror in his wake. Never did Nijinsky as the Negro Slave touch the Sultana, but his subtle and sensuous fingers fluttered close

to her flesh, clinging once or twice questioningly to a depending tassel. Pierced by the javelins of the Sultan's men, the Slave's death struggle might have been revolting and gruesome. Instead Nijinsky carried the eye rapidly upward with his tapering feet as they balanced for the briefest part of a second straight high in the air, only to fall inert with so brilliantly swift a movement that the aesthetic effect grappled successfully with the feeling of disgust which might have been aroused. This was acting, this was characterization, so completely merged in rhythm that the result became a perfect whole and not a combination of several intentions, as so often results from the work of an actor-dancer.

The heartbreaking *Petrouchka*, the roguish Harlequin, the Chopiniac of *Les Sylphides*—all were offered to our view; and *Narcisse*, in which Nijinsky not only did some very beautiful dancing, but posed (as the Greek youth admired himself in the mirror of the pool) with such utter and arresting grace that even here he awakened a new kind of emotion. In *La Princesse Enchantée* he merely danced, but how he danced! Do you who saw him still remember those flickering fingers and toes? "He winketh with his eyes, he speaketh with his feet, he teacheth with his fingers," is written in the Book of Proverbs, and the writer might have had in mind Nijinsky in *La Princesse Enchantée*. All these parts were differentiated, all completely realized, in the threefold intricacy of this baffling art, which perhaps is not an art at all until it is so realized, when its plastic, rhythmic, and histrionic elements become an entity.

After a summer in Spain and Switzerland without Nijinsky, the Russian Ballet returned to America for a second season, opening at the Manhattan Opera House, October 16, 1916. It is always a delight to hear and see performances in this theater, and it was found that the brilliance of the Ballet was much enhanced by its new frame. The season, however, opened with a disappointment. It had been announced that Nijinsky would dance on the first night his choreographic version of Richard Strauss's tone-poem, *Til Eulenspiegel*. It is not the first time that a press agent has made a false prophecy. While rehearsing the new work, Nijinsky twisted his ankle, and during the first week of the engagement he did not appear at all. This was doubly unfortunate, because the company was weaker than it had been the previous season, lacking both Massine and Tchernicheva. The only novelty (for America) produced during the first week was an arrangement of the divertissement from Rimsky-Korsakov's opera, *Sadko*, which had already been given a few times in Paris and London by the Ballet, never with conspicuous success. The second week of the season: Nijinsky returned to appear in three roles, the Faun, *Til Eulenspiegel*, and the Slave in

Scheherazade. Of his performance to Debussy's lovely music I have written elsewhere; nor did this new vision cause me to revise my opinions.

Til Eulenspiegel is the only new ballet the Russians have produced in America. (*Soleil de Nuit* was prepared in Europe, and performed once at the Paris Opéra before it was seen in New York. Besides, it was an arrangement of dances from an opera which is frequently given in Russia and which has been presented at the Opéra-Comique in Paris.) The *chef d'orchestre*, Pierre Monteux, refused to direct performances of this work, on the ground that the composer was not only a German, but a very much alive and active German patriot. On the occasions, therefore, that *Til* was performed in New York, the orchestra struggled along under the baton of Dr. Anselm Goetzl. In selecting this work and in his arrangement of the action Nijinsky was moved, no doubt, by consideration for the limitations of the company as it existed. The scenery and costumes by Robert E. Jones, of New York, were decidedly diverting—the best work this talented young man has done, I think. Over a deep, spreading background of ultramarine, the crazy turrets of medieval castles leaned dizzily to and fro. The costumes were exaggerations of the exaggerated fashions of the Middle Ages. Mr. Jones added feet of stature to the already elongated peaked headdresses of the period. The trains of the velvet robes, which might have extended three yards, were allowed to trail the full depth of the Manhattan Opera House stage. The colors were oranges, reds, greens, and blues, those indeed of Bakst's *Scheherazade*, but so differently disposed that they made an entirely dissimilar impression. The effect reminded one spectator of a Spanish omelet.

In arranging the scenario, Nijinsky followed in almost every detail Wilhelm Klatte's description of the meaning of the music, which is printed in program books whenever the tone-poem is performed, without Strauss's authority, but sometimes with his sanction. Nijinsky was quite justified in altering the end of the work, which hangs the rogue-hero, into another practical joke. His version of this episode fits the music and, in the original *Til Eulenspiegel* stories, Til is not hanged, but dies in bed. The keynote of Nijinsky's interpretation was gaiety. He was as utterly picaresque as the work itself; he reincarnated the spirit of Gil Blas; indeed, a new quality crept into stage expression through this characterization. Margaret Wycherly, one of the most active admirers of the dancer, told me after the first performance that she felt that he had for the first time leaped into the hearts of the great American public, whose appreciation of his subtler art as expressed in *Narcisse*, *Petrouchka*, and even *Scheherazade*, had been more moderate. There were those who protested that this was not the Til of the German legends, but any actor who attempts to give form

to a folk or historical character, or even a character derived from fiction, is forced to run counter to many an observer's preconceived ideas.

"It is an error to believe that pantomime is merely a way of doing without words," writes Arthur Symons, "that it is merely the equivalent of words. Pantomime is thinking overheard. It begins and ends before words have formed themselves, in a deeper consciousness than that of speech. And it addresses itself, by the artful limitations of its craft, to universal human experience, knowing that the moment it departs from those broad lines it will become unintelligible. It risks existence on its own perfection, as the rope-dancer does, to whom a false step means a downfall. And it appeals democratically to people of all nations. . . . And pantomime has that mystery which is one of the requirements of true art. To watch it is like dreaming. How silently, in dreams, one gathers the unheard sounds of words from the lips that do but make pretense of saying them! And does not everyone know that terrifying impossibility of speaking which fastens one to the ground for the eternity of a second, in what is the new, perhaps truer, computation of time in dreams? Something like that sense of suspense seems to hang over the silent actors in pantomime, giving them a nervous exaltation, which has its subtle, immediate effect upon us, in tragic and comic situation. The silence becomes an atmosphere, and with a very curious power of giving distinction to form and motion. I do not see why people should ever break silence on the stage except to speak poetry. Here, in pantomime, you have a gracious, expressive silence, beauty of gesture, a perfectly discreet appeal to the emotions, a transposition of the world into an elegant accepted convention."

Arthur Symons wrote these words before he had seen the Russian Ballet, before the Russian Ballet, as we know it, existed; indeed, before Nijinsky had begun to dance in public, and he felt that the addition of poetry and music to pantomime—the Wagner music-drama, in other words—brought about a perfect combination of the arts. Nevertheless, there is an obvious application of his remarks to the present instance. There is, indeed, the quality of a dream about the characters Nijinsky presents to us. I remember once, at a performance of the Russian Ballet, I sat in a box next to a most intelligent man, a writer himself; I was meeting him for the first time, and he was seeing the ballet for the first time. Before the curtain rose he had told me that dancing and pantomime were very pretty to look at, but that he found no stimulation in watching them, no mental and spiritual exaltation, such as might follow a performance of *Hamlet*. Having seen Nijinsky, I could not agree with him—and this indifferent observer became that evening himself a fervent disciple of the Ballet. For Nijinsky gave him, he found, just what his ideal performance

of Shakespeare's play might have given him, a basis for dreams, for thinking, for poetry. The ennobling effect of all great and perfect art, after the primary emotion, seems to be to set our minds wandering in a thousand channels, to suggest new outlets. Pater's experience before the *Mona Lisa* is unique only in its intense and direct expression.

No writer, no musician, no painter, can feel deep emotion before a work of art without expressing it in some way, although the expression may be a thousand leagues removed from the inspiration. And how few of us can view the art of Nijinsky without emotion! To the painter he gives a new sense of proportion, to the musician a new sense of rhythm, while to the writer he must perforce immediately suggest new words; better still, new meanings for old words. Dance, pantomime, acting, harmony, all these divest themselves of their worn-out accoutrements and appear, as if clothed by magic, in garments of unheard-of novelty; hue, texture, cut, and workmanship are all a surprise to us. We look enraptured, we go away enthralled, and perhaps even unconsciously a new quality creeps into our own work. It is the same glamour cast over us by contemplation of the Campo Santo at Pisa, or the Roman Theatre at Orange, or the Cathedral at Chartres—the inspiration for one of the most word-jeweled books in any language—or the New York sky line at twilight as one sails away into the harbor, or a great iron crane which lifts tons of alien matter in its gaping jaw. Great music can give us this feeling, the symphonies of Beethoven, Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Schubert's C major symphony, or César Franck's D minor, *The Sacrifice to the Spring* of Stravinsky, *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* of Debussy, Chabrier's Rhapsody, *España*; great interpretative musicians can give it to us, Ysaye at his best, Paderewski, Marcella Sembrich in song recital; but how few artists on the stage suggest even as much as the often paltry lines of the author, the often banal music of the composer! There is an *au delà* to all great interpretative art, something that remains after story, words, picture, and gesture have faded vaguely into that storeroom in our memories where are concealed these lovely ghosts of ephemeral beauty, and the artist who is able to give us this is blessed even beyond his knowledge, for to him has been vouchsafed the sacred kiss of the gods. This quality cannot be acquired; it cannot even be described; but it can be felt. With its beneficent aid the interpreter not only contributes to our pleasure, he broadens our horizon, adds to our knowledge and capacity for feeling.

As I read over these notes I realize that I have not been able to discover flaws in the art of this young man. It seems to me that in his chosen medium he approaches perfection. What he attempts to do, he always does perfectly. Can one say as much for any other interpreter? But it is a difficult matter to give the spirit of Nijinsky, to describe his art on

paper, to capture in ink the abundant grace, the measureless poetry, the infinite illusion of his captivating motion. Who can hope to do it? Future generations must take our word for his greatness. We can do little more than call it that. I shall have served my purpose if I have succeeded in this humble article in bringing back to those who have seen him a flashing glimpse of the imaginative actuality.



Nijinsky in *Petrouchka*. Elliott & Fry, London, 1911.

NOTES ON NIJINSKY PHOTOGRAPHS

BY EDWIN DENBY

LOOKING at the photographs of Nijinsky, one is struck by his expressive neck. It is an unusually thick and long neck. But its expressivity lies in its clear lift from the trunk, like a powerful thrust. The shoulders are not square, but slope downward; and so they leave the neck easily free, and the eye follows their silhouette down the arms with the sense of a line extraordinarily extended into space, as in a picture by Cézanne or Raphael. The head therefore, at the other end of this unusual extension, poised up in the air, gains an astonishing distinctness, and the tilt of it, even with no muscular accentuation, becomes of unusual interest. Nijinsky tilts his head lightly from the topmost joint, keeping this joint mobile against the upright thrust of the other vertebrae. He does not bend the neck back as some contemporary ballet dancers do. Seen from the side or the rear, the upward line of his back continues straight into the uprightness of the neck, like the neck of a Maillol statue. But Nijinsky alters his neck to suit a character role. The change is striking in the *Scheherazade* pictures—and Mr. Van Vechten, who saw him dance the part, describes him as a “head-wagging, simian creature.” Another variation is that for *Petrouchka*, where the shoulders are raised square to break the continuity of the silhouette; to make the arms dangle as a separate entity, and make the head independently wobbly as a puppet’s is, on no neck to speak of. The head here does not sum up or direct the action of the body; it seems to have only a minor, a pathetic function. But it bobs too nonsensically to be humanly pitiful. In the role of the Faun the shoulders are slightly lifted when the Faun becomes dimly aware of his own emotion; but the neck is held up firmly and candidly against the shoulder movement (which would normally press the neck to a forward slant); and so the silhouette is kept self-contained and the figure keeps its dignity. Notice, too, the neck in the reclining position of the Faun. Another poignant duplicity of emotion is expressed by

the head, neck, and shoulder line of the *Jeux* photographs—the neck rising against lifted shoulders and also bent sideways against a counter tilt of the head. The hero in *Jeux* seems to meet pathos with human nobility; not as the Faun does, with animal dignity.

Looking in these photographs farther along the figure, at the arms in particular, one is struck by their lightness, by the way in which they seem to be suspended in space. Especially in the pictures from *Pavillon* and from *Spectre*, they are not so much placed correctly, or advantageously or illustratively; rather they seem to flow out unconsciously from the moving trunk, a part of the fullness of its intention. They are pivoted, not lifted, from the shoulder or shoulder blade; their force—like the neck's—comes from the full strength of the back. And so they lead the eye more strongly back to the trunk than out beyond their reach into space. Even when they point, one is conscious of the force pointing quite as much as the object pointed at. To make a grammatical metaphor, the relation of subject to object is kept clear. This is not so simple in movement as a layman might think. A similar clarification of subject and object struck me in the bullfighting of Belmonte. His own body was constantly the subject of his motions, the bull the object. With other fighters, one often had the impression that not they personally, but their cloth was the subject that determined the fight. As a cloth is a dead thing, it can only be decorative, and the bull edged into the position of the subject; and the distinctness of the torero's drama was blurred. Nijinsky gives an effect in his arm gesture of himself remaining at the center of space, a strength of voluntary limitation related, in a way, to that of Spanish dance gesture.—This is what makes a dancer's arms look like a man's instead of a boy's.

An actual "object" to a dancer's "subject" is his partner. In dancing with a partner there is a difference between self-effacement and courtesy. Nijinsky in his pictures is a model of courtesy. The firmness of support he gives his partner is complete. He stands straight enough for two. His expression toward her is intense—in *Giselle* it expresses a supernatural relation, in *Pavillon* one of admiration, in *Faune* one of desire, in *Spectre* one of tenderness—and what a supporting arm that is in *Spectre*, as long and as strong as two. But he observes as well an exact personal remoteness, he shows clearly the fact that they are separate bodies. He makes a drama of their nearness in space. And in his own choreography—in *Faune*—the space between the figures becomes a firm body of air, a lucid statement of relationship, in the way intervening space does in the modern academy of Cézanne, Seurat, and Picasso.

One is struck by the massiveness of his arms. This quality also leads the eye back to the trunk, as in a Michelangelo figure. But it further gives to their graceful poses an ampli-

tude of strength that keeps them from looking innocuous or decorative. In particular in the Narcissus pose the savage force of the arms and legs makes credible that the hero's narcissism was not vanity, but an instinct that killed him, like an act of God. In the case of *Spectre*, the power of the arms makes their tendrillike bendings as natural as curvings are in a powerful world of young desire; while weaker and more charming arms might suggest an effeminate or saccharine coyness. There is indeed nothing effeminate in these gestures; there is far too much force in them.

It is interesting to try one's self to assume the poses on the pictures, beginning with arms, shoulders, neck, and head. The flowing line they have is deceptive. It is an unbelievable strain to hold them. The plastic relationships turn out to be extremely complex. As the painter de Kooning, who knows the photographs well and many of whose ideas I am using in these notes, remarked: Nijinsky does just the opposite of what the body would naturally do. The plastic sense is similar to that of Michelangelo and Raphael. One might say that the grace of them is not derived from avoiding strain, as a layman might think, but from the heightened intelligibility of the plastic relations. It is an instinct for countermovement so rich and so fully expressed, it is unique; though the plastic theory of countermovement is inherent in ballet technique.

Nijinsky's plastic vitality animates the poses derived from dances by Petipa or Fokine. It shines out, too, if one compares his pictures with those of other dancers in the same parts. This aspect of his genius appears to me one basis for his choreographic style, which specifies sharply plastic effects in dancing—and which in this sense is related both to Isadora and to the moderns. Unfortunately the dancers who now take the role of the Faun do not have sufficient plastic discipline to make clear the intentions of the dance.

From the photographs one can see that the present dancers of *Faune* have not even learned Nijinsky's stance. Nijinsky not only squares his shoulders far less, but also frequently not at all. He does not pull in his stomach and lift his thorax. Neither in shoulders nor chest does he exhibit his figure. His stomach has more expression than his chest. In fact, looking at his trunk, one notices a similar tendency to flat-chestedness (I mean in the stance, not in the anatomy) in all the pictures. It is, I believe, a Petersburg trait, and shared independently by Isadora and Martha Graham. In these photographs, at any rate, the expression does not come from the chest; it comes from below the chest, and flows up through it from below. The thorax, so to speak, passively, is not only pulled at the top up and back; at the bottom and from the side it is also pulled down and back. Its physical function is that of completing the circuit of muscles that hold the pelvis in relation to the spine. And it is this

relation that gives the dancer his balance. Balance (or aplomb, in ballet) is the crux of technique. If you want to see how good a dancer is, look at his stomach. If he is sure of himself there, if he is so strong there that he can present himself frankly, he (or she) can begin to dance expressively.—I say stomach because the stomach usually faces the audience; one might say waist, groin, or pelvic region.

In looking at Nijinsky pictures, one is struck by the upright tautness about the hips. His waist is broad and powerful. You can see it clearly in the Harlequin pictures. If he is posing on one leg, there is no sense of shifted weight, and as little if he seems to be bending to the side or forward. The effort this means may be compared to lifting a table by one leg and keeping the top horizontal. The center of gravity in the table, and similarly that of his body, has not been shifted. The delicacy with which he cantilevers the weight actually displaced keeps the firmness from being rigidity. I think it is in looking at his waist that one can see best the technical aspect of his instinct for concentrating the origin of movement so that all of it relates to a clear center which is not altered. He keeps the multiplicity, the diffusion which movement has, intelligible by not allowing any doubt as to where the center is. When he moves he does not blur the center of weight in his body; one feels it as clearly as if he were still standing at rest, one can follow its course clearly as it floats about the stage through the dance. And so the motion he makes looks controlled and voluntary and reliable. I imagine it is this constant sense of balance that gave his dancing the unbroken continuity and flow through all the steps and leaps and rests from beginning to end, that critics marveled at.

Incidentally, their remarks of this kind also point to an extraordinary accuracy in his musical timing. For to make the continuity rhythmic as he did, he must have had an unerring instinct at which moment to attack a movement, so that the entire sequence of it would flow as continuously and transform itself into the next motion as securely as did the accompanying sound. To speak of him as unmusical, with no sense of rhythm, as Stravinsky has, is therefore an impropriety that is due to a confusion of meaning in the word "rhythm." The choreography of *Faune* proves that Nijinsky's natural musical intelligence was of the highest order. For this was the first ballet choreography set clearly, not to the measures and periods, but to the expressive flow of the music, to its musical sense. You need only compare *Faune's* assurance in this respect to the awkwardness musically of Fokine's second scene in *Petrouchka*, the score of which invites the same sort of understanding. But this is not in the photographs.

Nijinsky does not dance from his feet; he dances from his pelvis. The legs do not show

off. They have no ornamental pose. Even in his own choreography, though the leg gestures are "composed," they are not treated as pictorial possibilities. They retain their weight. They tell where the body goes and how. But they don't lead it. They are, however, completely expressive in this role; and the thighs in the *Spectre* picture with Karsavina are as full of tenderness as another dancer's face. It is noticeable, too, that Nijinsky's legs are not especially turned out, and a similar moderate *en dehors* seems to be the rule in the Petersburg male dancers of Nijinsky's generation. But the parallel feet in *Narcisse* and *Faune*, and the pigeon toes in *Til* are not a willful contradiction of the academic principle for the sake of something new. They can, it seems to me, be properly understood only by a turned-out dancer, as Nijinsky himself clearly was. For the strain of keeping the pelvis in the position the ballet dancer holds it in for balance is much greater with parallel or turned-in feet (which contradict the outward twist of the thigh); and this strain gives a new plastic dimension to the legs and feet, if it is carried through as forcefully as Nijinsky does.—I am interested, too, to notice that in standing Nijinsky does not press his weight mostly on the ball of the big toe, but grips the floor with the entire surface of the foot.

I have neglected to mention the hands, which are alive and simple, with more expression placed in the wrist than the fingers. They are not at all "Italian"; and are full of variety without an emphasis on sensitivity. The hands in *Spectre* are celebrated, and remind one of the hands in Picassos ten years later. I am also very moved by the uplifted, half-unclenched hands in the *Jeux* picture, as mysterious as breathing in sleep. One can see, too, that in *Petrouchka* the hands are black-mittened, not white-mittened as now; the new costume makes the dance against the black wall in the second scene a foolish hand dance, instead of a dance of a whole figure, as intended.

The manner in which Nijinsky's face changes from role to role is immediately striking. It is enhanced by make-up, but not created by it. In fact, a friend pointed out that the only role in which one recognizes Nijinsky's civilian face is that of *Petrouchka* where he is most heavily made up. There is no mystery about such transformability. People don't usually realize how much any face changes in the course of a day, and how often it is unrecognizable for an instant or two. Nijinsky seems to have controlled the variability a face has. The same metamorphosis is obvious in his body. The *Spectre*, for instance, has no age or sex, the *Faun* is adolescent, the hero of *Jeux* has a body full-grown and experienced. *Til* can be either boy or man. The Slave in *Scheherazade* is fat, the *Spectre* is thin. It does not look like the same body. One can say that in this sense there is no exhibitionism in Nijinsky's photographs. He is never showing you himself, or an interpretation of himself. He is never vain

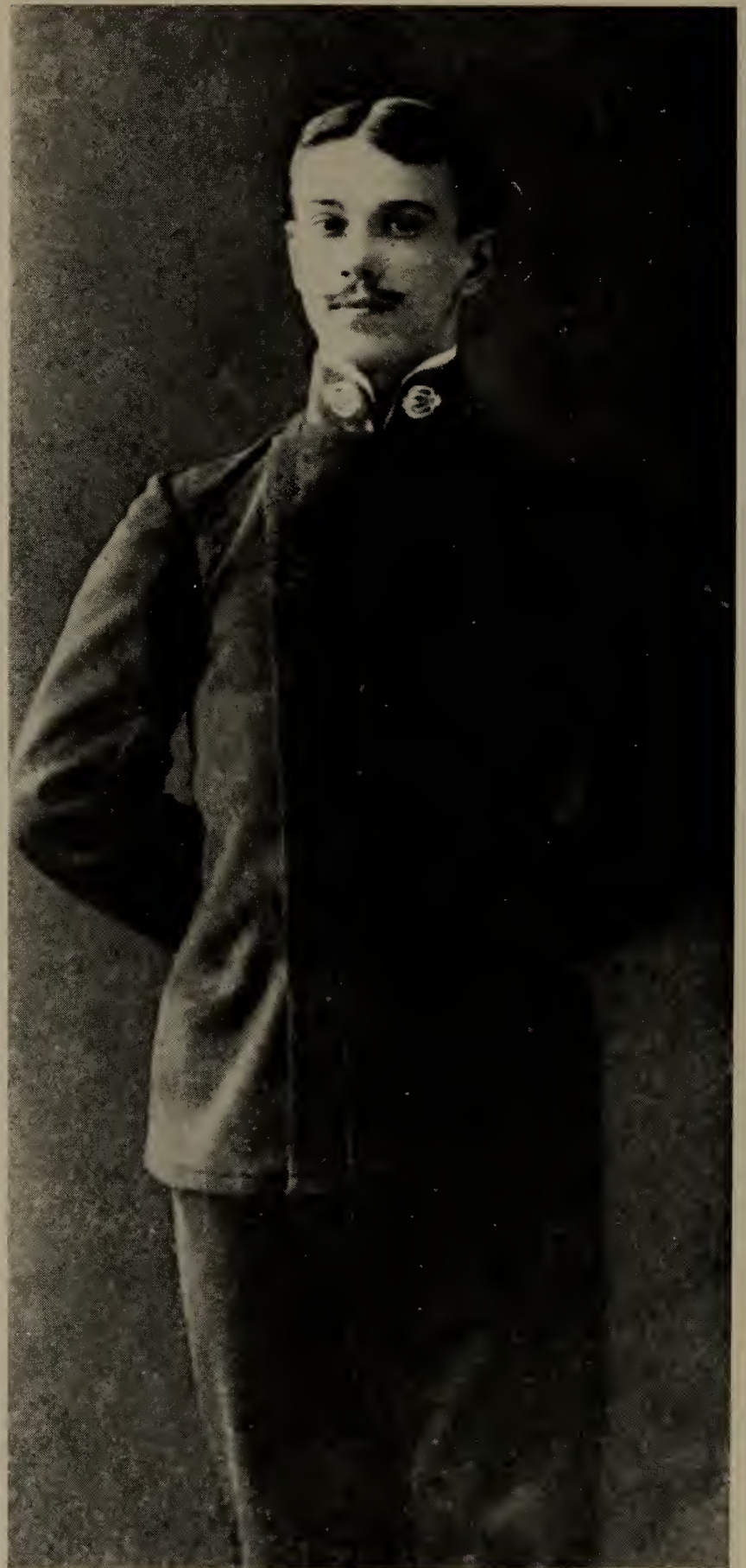
of what he is showing you. The audience does not see him as a professional dancer, or as a professional charmer. He disappears completely, and instead there is an imaginary being in his place. Like a classic artist, he remains detached, unseen, unmoved, disinterested. Looking at him, one is in an imaginary world, entire and very clear; and one's emotions are not directed at their material objects, but at their imaginary satisfactions. As he said himself, he danced with love.

To sum up, Nijinsky in his photographs shows us the style of a classic artist. The emotion he projects, the character he projects is not communicated as his own, but as one that exists independently of himself, in the objective world. Similarly his plastic sense suggests neither a private yearning into an infinity of space nor a private shutting out of surrounding relationships; both of them legitimate romantic attitudes. The weight he gives his own body, the center which he gives his plastic motions, strikes a balance with the urge and rapidity of leaps and displacements. It strikes a balance between the role he dances and the roles of his partners. The distinction of place makes the space look real, the distinction of persons makes the drama real. And for the sake of this clarification he characterizes (or mimes, one might say) even such a conventional ornamental show-off, or "pure dance," part as that in *Pavillon*. On the other hand, the awkward heaviness that *Faune*, *Sacre*, and *Jeux* exhibited, and that was emphasized by their angular precision, was not, I believe, an anticlassic innovation. It was an effort to make the dance more positive, to make clearer still the center of gravity of a movement, so that its extent, its force, its direction, its elevation can be appreciated not incidentally merely, but integrally as drama. He not only extended the plastic range in dancing, but clarified it. And this is the way to give meaning to dancing; not secondhand literary meaning, but direct meaning. Nijinsky's latest intentions of "circular movement," and the improvisational quality Til seems to have had are probably a normal development of his sense of motion in relation to a point of repose—a motion that grew more animated and diverse as his instinct became more exercised. (An evolution not wholly dissimilar can be followed in Miss Graham's work, for instance.) And I consider the following remark he made to be indicative of the direction of his instinct: "La grace, le charme, le joli sont rangés tout autour du point central qu'est le beau. C'est pour le beau que je travaille." I do not see anything in these pictures that would lead one to suppose that Nijinsky's subsequent insanity cast any premonitory shadow on his phenomenally luminous dance intelligence.

These notes are not meant to be exhaustive, but to invite you to look at the pictures attentively. There is much to enjoy in them. I mentioned another aspect of them in *Modern*

Music: "He looks as if the body remembered the whole dance, all the phases of it, as he holds the one pose; he seems to be thinking, I've just done that, and then after this I do that, and then that, and then comes that; so his body looks like a face lighting up at a single name that evokes a whole crowd of remembered friends." This small album of his photographs is intended to take the place for the present of a book that I hope Mr. Paul Magriel will be able to assemble after the war, from all over the world: a book presenting a complete photographic record. We have included here a snapshot of Nijinsky leaping high. Few of the other pictures seem to be action shots. Several of those by de Meyer are not even poses literally from the dances, but seem invented to give a sense of the general tone of the role. I do not think this vitiates their accuracy in showing Nijinsky's style of dancing, or of characterization. The sureness of invention they show helps us to see why as a dancer he was, to the most intelligent public of his time, unparalleled.

In their stillness Nijinsky's pictures have more vitality than the dances they remind us of as we now see them on the stage. They remain to show us what dancing can be; and what the spectator and the dancer each aspire to, and hold to be a fair standard of art. I think they give the discouraged dance lover faith in dancing as a serious human activity. As Mr. Van Vechten wrote after seeing him in 1916: "His dancing has the unbroken quality of music, the balance of great painting, the meaning of fine literature, and the emotion inherent in all these arts."



Left: Nijinsky, ca. 1900.
Right: Nijinsky, ca. 1908. (In cadet
uniform of the Imperial Russian Ballet
School).





Nijinsky in *Eunice*. St. Petersburg, 1907.



Nijinsky. K. A. Fischer, St. Petersburg, 1907.



Nijinsky in *Le Pavillon d'Armide*. St. Petersburg, 1907.



Nijinsky in *Giselle*. Paris, 1911.



Nijinsky with Karsavina in *Giselle*. Paris, 1911.



Nijinsky in *King Candaule*. St. Petersburg, 1908.



Nijinsky in *Giselle*. St. Petersburg, 1909.



Upper: Nijinsky in
*Le Pavillon d'Ar-
mide*. Paris, 1909.
Lower: Nijinsky
in *Le Pavillon
d'Armide* with
Pavlova. St. Pe-
tersburg, 1907.





Nijinsky in *Le Pavillon d'Armide*. De Meyer, Paris, 1911. Upper right: Action snapshot.



Nijinsky in *Carnaval*. De Meyer, Paris, 1910.



Nijinsky in *Scheherazade*. De Meyer, Paris, 1910.



Nijinsky in *Le Festin*. Bert, Paris, 1911.



Nijinsky in *Les Orientales*. Druet, Paris, 1911.



Nijinsky in *Le Spectre de la Rose*. Hoppé, Paris, 1911.



Nijinsky in *Spectre de la Rose*. Lower:
With Karsavina, Paris, 1911.



Nijinsky in *Le Dieu Bleu*. *Comoedia Illustré*, Paris, 1912.



Nijinsky in *L'Après-midi D'un Faune*. De Meyer, Paris, 1911.



Nijinsky in *Petrouchka*. Elliott & Fry, London, 1911.



Nijinsky in *Les Orientales*. Paris, 1911.





Nijinsky in *Jeux*. Upper left and lower, with Karsavina and Shollar. Paris, 1911.





Upper left and lower:
Nijinsky with Karsavina
in *Zobeide*. Berlin, 1914.
Upper right: With Kar-
savina in *Scheherazade*.
Berlin, 1914.



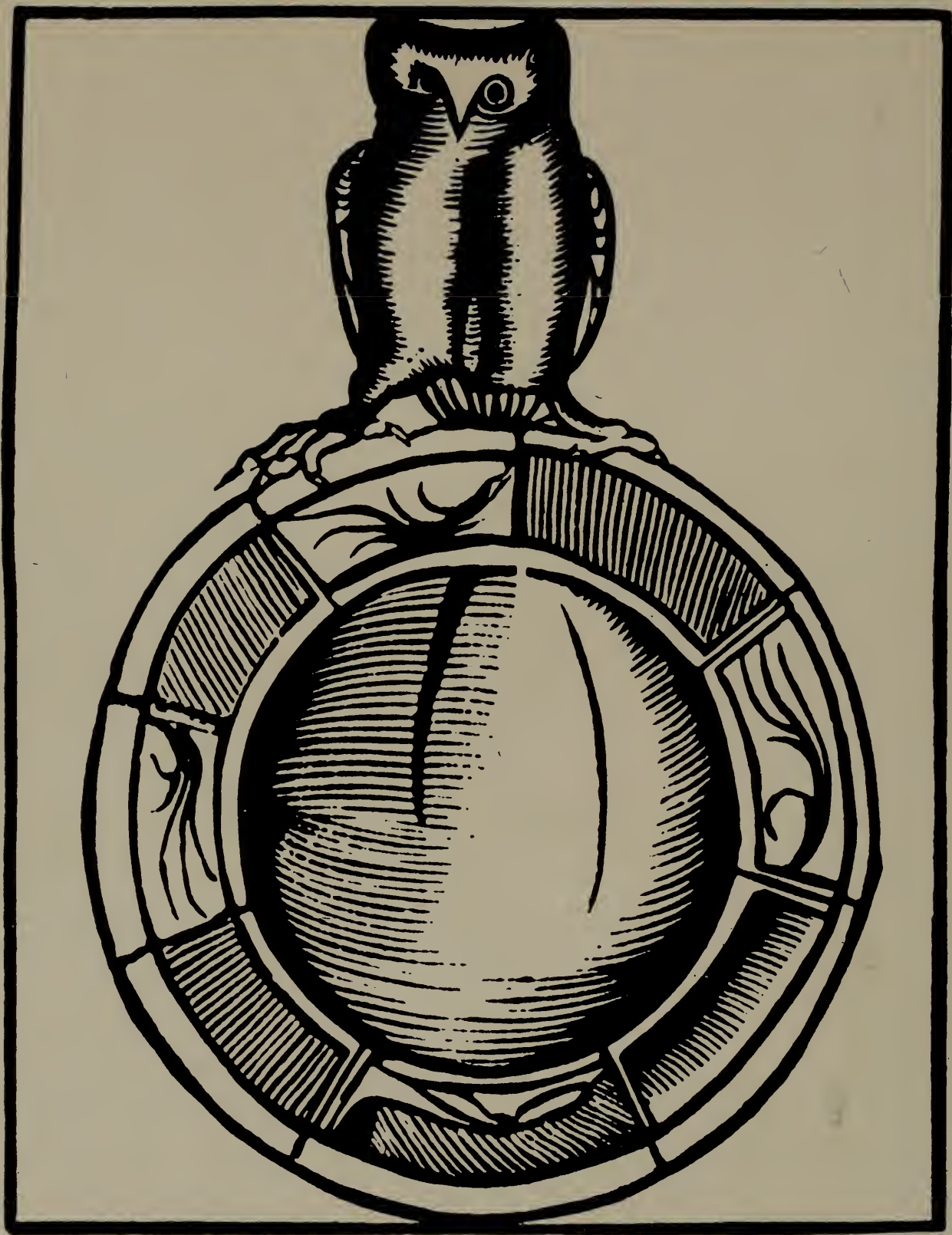
Nijinsky in practice clothes. St.
Petersburg, 1908.



Nijinsky. White, New York,
1916.



Nijinsky as *Til Eulenspiegel*. New York, 1916.



Til Eulenspiegel's insignia from a 15th century German woodcut, which was drawn on the curtain for the ballet.

NIJINSKY AND TIL EULENSPIEGEL

BY ROBERT EDMOND JONES

The question is not yet settled, whether much that is glorious—whether all that is profound—does not spring . . . from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect.
—Poe's *Eleonora*

IN 1916 a diffident young man from New Hampshire who was just beginning to make his way in New York as a stage designer was commissioned by Vaslav Nijinsky to design the décor for a new ballet. Up to that time no American designer had been so honored. I was that young man, and I am going to set down as carefully as possible my recollections of this great dancer and choreographer—now, alas! a living legend—and of an experience so novel and so startling that it altered the course of my entire life.

Not all of my story is pleasant. It is a story of two differing temperaments—of two differing cultures, really—unexpectedly and violently thrown into contact with one another. In the ballet *Til Eulenspiegel*, the artistic approach of old Russia and the artistic approach of new America met and fused for the first time in theater history. The result—it must be stated at the outset—was an instant and emphatic success. Since that day many dramatic events have been taking place in the world. Now, in this year of grace 1945, it would appear that that old Russia and new America are destined to march side by side toward a radiant future. But at the time of this association such a rapport was undreamed of, and it fell to me to bear the full brunt of the initial impact of the Russian temperament, to take it, so to speak, head on. Certain details of this experience seem to me in retrospect not unlike the custard-pie scenes in an old Mack Sennett comedy.

I shall set down my story in a series of pictures, like the “flashbacks” of a cinema, as they appeared to me at the time, without benefit of a maturer judgment. Some of the story is

sordid, some of it is humiliating, some of it is outrageous. But all of it is marvelous, and all of it is alive.

The first picture: It is the afternoon of a late spring day in 1916, hot and humid. I sit in the drawing room of Emilie Hapgood, the president of the now-defunct New York Stage Society. Curtains are drawn against the breathless heat. The room—all ivory-white and pale silks—is in semidarkness. We converse in low voices, waiting. Presently Nijinsky and Mme. Nijinsky are announced. I see, first, an extremely pretty young woman, fashionably dressed in black, and, following her, a small, somewhat stocky young man walking with delicate birdlike steps—precise, a dancer's walk. He is very nervous. His eyes are troubled. He looks eager, anxious, excessively intelligent. He seems tired, bored, excited, all at once. I observe that he has a disturbing habit of picking at the flesh on the side of his thumbs until they bleed. Through all my memories of this great artist runs the recurring image of those raw red thumbs. He broods and dreams, goes far away into reverie, returns again. At intervals his face lights up with a brief, dazzling smile. His manner is simple, ingratiating, so direct as to be almost humble. I like him at once. Tales of unusual accomplishments and unusual ardors have clustered around this man as honeybees cluster about a perfumed flower. There was something about a scarf. There was something about a banquet. There was something about a leap through a window. There was something. . . . But that was then and this is now. I see no trace in him of the legendary exotic. Here is only the straightforward and matter-of-fact approach of the newly appointed maestro of the Russian Ballet who has an idea and wants to see it carried out.

I realize at once that I am in the presence of a genius. What, precisely, does one mean by this word, so often and so carelessly used? Miss Gertrude Stein, who by her own account of herself would seem to know, defines it (I quote from memory) as the ability to talk and listen at the same time. This particular attribute of Nijinsky's genius is not evident at the moment, since he and I are struggling to communicate our ideas to one another in extremely halting French. I sense, however, a quality in him which I can define here only as a continual preoccupation with standards of excellence so high that they are really not of this world. This artist, it is clear, concerns himself with incredible perfections. I sense, too, the extraordinary nervous energy of the man—an almost frightening awareness, a curious mingling of eagerness and apprehension. The atmosphere he brings with him is—how shall I say?—*oppressive*. There is in him an astonishing drive, a mental engine, too high-powered, racing—perhaps even now—to its final breakdown. Otherwise there is nothing of the abnormal

about him. Only an impression of something too eager, too brilliant, a quivering of the nerves, a nature racked to dislocation by a merciless creative urge. And those raw thumbs.

I show the maestro a portfolio of my designs for various stage productions. There are costume sketches for *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*, the stage settings for *The Devil's Garden* and *The Happy Ending*, recently produced by Arthur Hopkins, some notes for *Les Précieuses Ridicules*, the project for Shelley's *Cenci* worked out during my *Wanderjahr* in Germany. It is obvious that Nijinsky thinks that I am a beginner—indeed, I am one—but I can see that he is interested in my drawings. There is something in them that he may be able to use. We sit side by side on the carpet in the center of the shadowy room, turning over the leaves of the portfolio. “Très heureux,” he says, politely. . . . The couple departs. I am left in an agony of anticipation. Dare I hope? . . . Could it be? . . . I wonder . . . if only—!

Another picture: I am accepted—I am a happy boy this day—and I am sent to Bar Harbor to collaborate with the maestro on the creation of the new ballet. I am quartered in a huge old-fashioned summer hotel, all piazzas and towers, with curving driveways and mammoth beds of angry red cannas on the lawns. Nijinsky lives there, too, with his pretty wife—always a little *souffrante* from the heat—and an enchanting girl baby with oblique Mongolian eyes like her father's. He practices hard and long during the day with his accompanist in the lovely little Greek temple set among the pines by the shore of the bay. In the evenings we work together until far into the night. And how we work!

Coming on the heels of the most striking series of novelties in America for the last ten years, Til Eulenspiegel stood in a class by itself as a combination of musical, pictorial, and terpsichorean art. . . . How shall I tell of this long-forgotten ballet, so fresh, so natural, so innocent, that flashed and vanished like a fevered dream? No critic, with the exception of H. T. Parker of the Boston *Transcript*, seems to have been able to appreciate it at the time in its true relation to the other works in the Diaghilev repertoire. It was too original in its conception, too novel, too seldom performed. Relatively few people saw it, it was soon gone, and now it is only a memory. But without question it showed Nijinsky at the very height of his creative power, and I believe it to have been one of the few genuine masterpieces—I use the word deliberately—in the entire recorded history of ballet.

Perhaps the clearest and simplest way to give the reader an impression of the finished work is to quote from Robert Bagar's excellent synopsis, *The Story of the Ballet Music*:

A strong sense of German folk-feeling pervades the whole work; the source from which the tone-poet drew his inspiration is clearly indicated in the introductory bars. . . . To some extent this stands for the "once upon a time" of the story books. That what follows is not to be treated in the pleasant and agreeable manner of narrative poetry, but in a more sturdy fashion, is at once made apparent by a characteristic bassoon figure which breaks in *sforzato* upon the *piano* of the strings. Of equal importance for the development of the piece is the immediately following humorous horn theme. . . . Beginning quietly and gradually becoming more lively, it is at first heard against a tremolo of the "divided" violins and then again in the *tempo primo*. . . .

Here he (Til) is (clarinet phrase followed by chord for wind instruments). He wanders through the land as a thoroughgoing adventurer. His clothes are tattered and torn: a queer, fragmentary version of the Eulenspiegel motive resounds from the horns. Following a merry play with this important leading motive, which directly leads to a short but brilliant *tutti*, in which it again asserts itself, first in the flutes, and then finally merges into a softly-murmuring and extended tremolo for the violas, this same motive, gracefully phrased, reappears in succession in the basses, flute, first violins, and again in the basses. The rogue, putting on his best manners, slyly passes through the gate, and enters a certain city. It is market-day; the women sit at their stalls and the plattle (flutes, oboes, and clarinets). Hop! Eulenspiegel springs on his horse (indicated by rapid triplets extending through three measures, from the low D of the bass clarinet to the highest A of the D clarinet), gives a smack of his whip, and rides into the midst of the crowd. Clink, clash, clatter! A confused sound of broken pots and pans, and the market-women are put to flight. In haste the rascal rides away (as is admirably illustrated by a *fortissimo* passage for the trombones) and secures a safe retreat.

This was his first merry prank; a second follows immediately. . . . Eulenspiegel has put on the vestments of a priest, and assumes a very unctuous mien. Though posing as a preacher of morals, the rogue peeps out from the folds of his mantle (the Eulenspiegel motive on the clarinet points to the imposture). He fears for the success of his scheme. A figure played by muted violins, horns and trumpets makes it plain that he does not feel comfortable in his borrowed plumes.

But soon he makes up his mind. Away with all scruples! He tears them off (solo, violin, *glissando*).

Again the Eulenspiegel theme is brought forward in the previous lively tempo, but is now subtly metamorphosed and chivalrously colored. Eulenspiegel has become a Don Juan, and he waylays pretty women. And one has bewitched him: Eulenspiegel is in love. Hear how now, glowing with love, the violins, clarinets, and flutes sing. But in vain. His advances are received with derision, and he goes away in a rage. How can one treat him so slightly? Is he not a splendid fellow? Vengeance on the whole human race!

He gives vent to his rage in a *fortissimo* of horns in unison followed by a pause, and strange personages suddenly draw near ('cellos). A troop of honest, worthy Philistines!

In an instant all his anger is forgotten. But it is still his chief joy to make fun of these lords

and protectors of blameless decorum, to mock them, as is apparent from the lively and accentuated fragments of the theme, sounded at the beginning by the horn, which are now heard first from horns, violins, 'cellos, and then from trumpets, oboes, and flutes. Now that Eulenspiegel has had his joke, he goes away and leaves the professors and doctors behind in thoughtful meditation. Fragments of the typical theme of the Philistines are here treated canonically. . . .

If we take a formal view, we have now reached the repetition of the chief theme. A merry jester, a born liar, Eulenspiegel goes wherever he can succeed with a hoax. His insolence knows no bounds. Alas! there is a sudden jolt to his wanton humor. The drum rolls a hollow roll; the jailer drags the rascally prisoner into the criminal court. The verdict "guilty" is thundered against the brazen-faced knave.

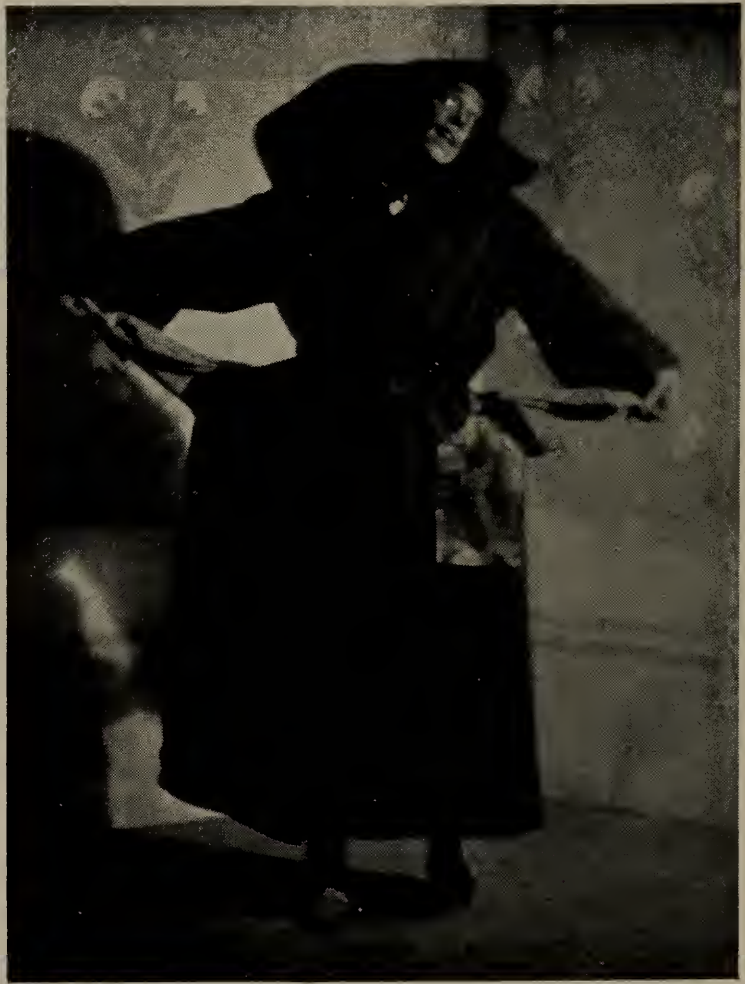
The Eulenspiegel theme replies calmly to the threatening chords of wind and lower strings. Eulenspiegel lies. Again the threatening tones resound; but Eulenspiegel does not confess his guilt. On the contrary, he lies for the third time. His jig is up. Fear seizes him. The Hypocrisy motive is sounded piteously; the fatal moment draws near; his hour has struck! The descending leap of a minor seventh in bassoons, horns, trombones, tuba, betokens his death. He is danced in air. A last struggle (flutes), and his soul takes flight.

After a sad, tremulous *pizzicato* of the strings the epilogue begins. At first it is almost identical with the introductory measures, which are repeated in full; then the most essential parts of the second and third chief-theme passages appear, and finally merge into the soft chord of the sixth on A-flat, while woodwinds and violins sustain. Eulenspiegel has become a legendary character. The people tell their tales about him; 'Once upon a time. . . .' But that he was a merry rogue and a real devil of a fellow seems to be expressed by the final eight measures, full orchestra, *fortissimo*.

The character of the spectacle itself is suggested by this excerpt from *Legends of the Ballets*, by Frederick A. King:

With Puck as his nearest analogue in English literature, Mr. Nijinsky brings forward out of German folk-lore the figure of the rogue whose pranks set at naught the customs and conventions of the common-place people. He flits in and out of the market place of a mediaeval town, appearing successively as a buffoon, a clergyman, a knight and a professor, in each instance mocking the populace and mystifying their regulated minds in whom the routine of life admits of no deviations. His inflammatory speeches stir the people to anger and he is arrested and brought before a judge. Here again he only mocks and his reward is a sentence to die upon the gallows. After his death the people are overcome with remorse; they remember his bright sallies, his gleaming wit, his fascinating presence, and their minds are not composed until his spirit appears and assures them he will live forever in the hearts of the people.

The ballet was devised and elaborated by Mr. Nijinsky during his recent confinement in Austria as a prisoner of war. Mr. Strauss, whose scores have already been utilized by the Russians in their



Nijinsky in *Til Eulenspiegel*. New York, 1916.

ballets, readily lent his assent to the use of this one, and even volunteered to alter the reading of the score to adapt it to the exigencies of choreographic treatment. To this proposal, however, Mr. Nijinsky replied that no necessity would require such a step, as he had already visualized the entire action from the original.

Nijinsky's energy, his ardor, his daring, his blazing imagination, by turns fantastic, gorgeous, grotesque, are a source of continual astonishment and delight to me. His conception of this ballet is vastly new and different. A consummate actor, he changes, chameleon-like, from moment to moment as he talks. Now he is a child, wide-eyed and mischievous, now a jeering zany, now a lover, tender and pleading, now a demoniac figure from a medieval Dance of Death. Always he is repeating the phrase, "Pour faire rire, pour faire rire." He summons the spirits of Breughel, of Munchhausen, of Rabelais. Gargantua and Pantagruel peer over his shoulder. Everything in this ballet is to be gay, athletic, coarse, animal. An irresistible comicality breathes through it all, a light deft fresh movement, a ripple of mocking laughter. At times it seems not so much a ballet as an embodied romp. "Pour faire rire, pour faire rire. . . ."

The maestro is at my elbow. I draw. He watches, criticizes, exhorts. Together we map out the design for the front curtain—a huge sheet of parchment emblazoned with Til's device of the owl and the looking glass, all blurred and worn, like a page torn from a long-forgotten manuscript of the Middle Ages. The market place of Braunschweig begins to take shape in front of the brooding black mass of the cathedral, a Braunschweig seen through Til's own eyes. We fill the square with flaunting gay color. I sketch the rosy-cheeked apple-woman with her big basket of apples, all red and green and russet; the cloth merchant in his shop; the fat blond baker with his long loaves of bread; the scrawny sweetmeat seller, decked out in peppermint stripes of red and white, like one of his own candies; the cobbler carrying his rack of oddly shaped shoes; the burghers, the priests, the professors in their long robes and their ridiculous shovel hats; the street urchins and the beggars; the three chatelaines, taking the air beneath peaked hennins that tower a full six feet above their heads, their trains streaming away ten feet, twenty feet, thirty feet behind them . . . and Til himself in his varied disguises—Til the imp, Til the lover, Til the scholar, Til flouting, taunting, imploring, writhing in his death agonies. . . .

The hours fly past. Wild, eager, anxious hours.

Invitations to lunch and dine at the great houses of Bar Harbor are showered upon me

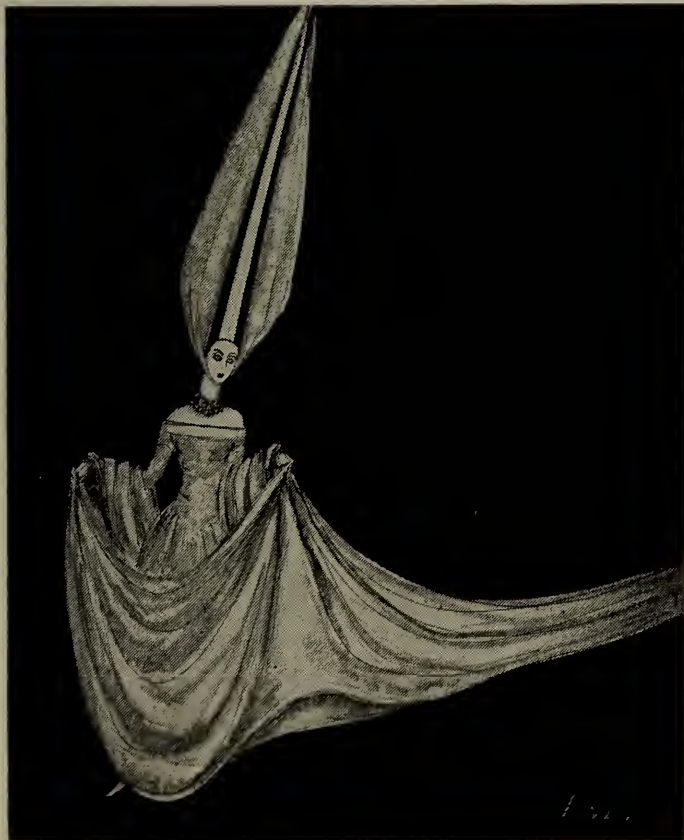
like a rain of gold. At first I am overwhelmed by this unexpected and profuse hospitality, but I soon realize that I am being sought after only in order that my various hosts and hostesses may induce me to bring the great dancer to their tables. Some of these invitations are on a lower social plane. One morning the maestro and I are invited to the fashionable swimming pool. After our swim we dress in adjoining little wooden cabanas. I am partly dressed. I hear a light tap at the door. I open it. A middle-aged man stands there, exquisitely dressed in fastidious nuances of pearl gray which harmonize with the tones of his silvery, scented mustache. He is tall and willowy and his delicate hands are beautifully manicured. We look at one another. No word is spoken. Presently he takes a large flat case of pearl-gray leather from his pocket, opens the lid and holds the case out to me. On a bed of pearl-gray velvet lies a mass of beautiful jewels—moonstones, black pearls, diamonds, emeralds, cabochon rubies. . . . There is an awkward silence. Time seems to run down and stand still, like a worn-out alarm clock, like a tired heart that stops beating. I hear Nijinsky putting on his shoes in the next compartment. The stranger in gray holds out his store of fabulous baubles, all glittering and flashing in the acrid New England sunlight. All at once I burst out laughing. He closes the door, turns on his heel, and silently goes away.

Another picture: We are in New York once more and rehearsals are beginning in earnest. I spend many hours with Nijinsky and his company on the bare stage of the old Manhattan Opera House. The wonderful music of Moussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov pervades the air. It is new to me. I breathe it in, and I tremble. I am ill with excitement. Mystical winds blow over river valleys. Conflagrations of color blaze on faraway mountains. Spilt blood dries on daggers of cold steel. Violins torture and sting. I hear cries and sobs. Always death is in the air—cruel death, bitter death. Always the eternal farewells. . . . I go through the days in a dream. Can life indeed be so rich, so splendid, so passionate? Even now, after twenty-nine years, the reveries of those enchanted hours come back to me and I am lost once more in the horizons of the mysterious lands that Glinka and Borodin knew.

The scale model for the setting is finished. The designs for the costumes are likewise finished and approved. Now comes the first difficulty, the first sign of friction. A storm is gathering. Why is it, someone has asked, that birth is always painful and rarely lovely?

In this country when scenery is to be painted, the various “drops” and “flats” of canvas are stretched on frames, like huge easels, which hang at the sides of the scenic studios and are raised or lowered through slots cut in the floor by means of ropes and pulleys and counter-

A. Costume sketch for *Chatelaine*.



B. Costume sketch for *Til*.



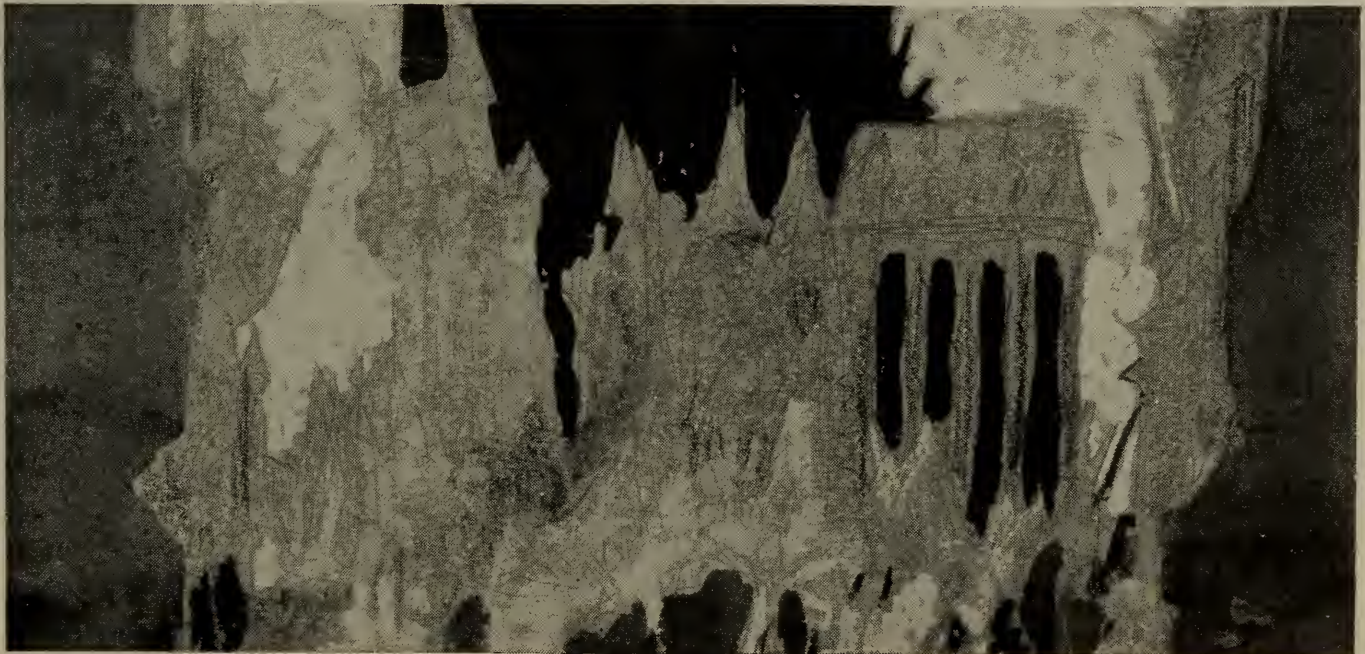
Costume sketch for *The Professors*.

weights. In Russia, however, the method of scene painting is quite different. The drops and flats are simply laid flat on the floor and the painters, wearing carpet slippers, roam about over them carrying great pails of color and long-handled brushes, like brooms. Nijinsky, quite naturally, wishes the setting for *Til* to be executed in the Russian manner, *sur planché*. But alas! there is no one in New York who knows how to paint in this style. Work is accordingly started in the conventional American manner in the West Side studios of Dodge & Castle. When Nijinsky hears of this he orders the work stopped at once.

The next picture shows the maestro riding toward the scenic studio in a taxi with me through a Negro district known as San Juan Hill, after the bloody battleground of that name in the Spanish War. A director of the Metropolitan Opera sits between us. We are silent and tense. The studio is at the foot of a hill by the Hudson. As we descend the hill a Negress is carried shrieking out of a doorway, spouting blood from a dozen razor slashes on her head and arms. A bad omen? I wonder. . . .

We go up steep narrow winding stairs to the scene loft. This is a long, narrow and extremely high space with walls of dirty whitewashed brick. The paint frames hang from cables

along the wall at either side. Tall, narrow windows are set high up at either end. The air is charged with a strong, almost nauseating smell of fish glue. Underneath the windows stand rough wooden cabinets, like bookshelves, on which are arranged dozens upon dozens of white china *pots de chambre* filled to overflowing with colored pigments in bewildering variety—gamboge, raw umber, ultramarine, orange mineral, rose madder, vert émeraude. . . . Half a dozen painters—“artists” is their traditional title—we still say, “Job for the artist!” or “Hey, artist!”—looking in their dirty white overalls not unlike a band of White Wings, hold others of these useful receptacles, into which they dip their paintbrushes from time to time, applying streaks of paint in vivid colors to the great sheets of canvas stretched on the frames at either side of the loft. It is all rather like a Freudian dream in which one sees with horror one’s deepest and most forbidden repressions dragged howling into the harsh light of day. Nijinsky gives a wild look about him. His eyes swivel in his head. Is *this* the way stage settings are painted in “les pays des barbares”? He mutters something unintelligible. The incongruity of the occasion strikes all three of us at the same instant. We shout with hysterical laughter. The tension is broken. “C’est vraiment très heureux,” the maestro says with a giggle. We ride up the hill again, relaxed and friendly now. We return to the rehearsal. I am only too content to let the matter rest. But through my mind runs a phantasmagoria of conflicting images—the figure of the dreaming faun, a rose petal



Sketch for the set of *Til Eulenspiegel*. Collection of Fred Schang.

drifting through a moonlit window in a soft summer night, star-drenched banquets at the Lido, répétitions générales in Paris with languid balletomanes from the Côte d'Azur sighing and shuddering, raw red thumbs, winding stairs, *pots de chambre* splashed with hues of more-than-Oriental splendor, White Wings, rivers of blood on a sidewalk. . . . How will it end?

Another picture rises in the memory. Etched in acid, this one. I am unexpectedly summoned to the Opera House. The completed setting for *Til Eulenspiegel* is standing on the stage. I glance at it quickly as I pass. Not bad, I say to myself. I sense an obscurely hostile atmosphere in the theater. I am escorted to Nijinsky's dressing room.

The walls (I remember to this day) are papered in stripes of two tones of violent red. There is a pier glass and a chaise longue. On the dressing table a number of stiletto-like knives, sharpened to a razor edge, are ranged in an orderly row. The maestro is waiting for me in a flame of rage. Torrents of Russian imprecations pour from his lips. The open door fills with frowning alien faces. Nijinsky switches to broken French. He lashes out at me with an insensate blind hate. It is a nightmare set in a blast furnace. I gather that in his opinion America is, of all countries in the world, the most backward in every aspect of its culture, that the level of artistic achievement on this side of the Atlantic Ocean is not only beneath notice but beneath contempt, and that Destiny has selected me—me!—from out of America's countless millions to symbolize, eternally and ineffaceably, everything that is most benighted in our so-called civilization. Since that day I have had occasion to hear these same views aired more than once. I still cannot believe that they are true.

Presently Nijinsky pauses out of sheer exhaustion. We go back to the stage. The setting stands there, dejected, like a child that has been punished. Swift curt commands are issued. Stagehands hale the accursed thing from sight, swing it into the flies, flatten it against the back wall of the theater. A shattered dream, a house of cards demolished. . . . The rehearsal begins, belated and listless. The rhythms falter, the air seems duller than Saturnian lead. Suddenly there is a cry. The maestro stumbles and falls. He has sprained his ankle. He is carried moaning and cursing to his suite at the Biltmore Hotel. "Your scenery is so bad," a dancer says to me, "that when our maestro saw it he fell down." Eager throats take up the refrain: "Yes, your scenery is so bad that when our maestro saw it he fell down."

I am a very discouraged boy indeed.

At the theater the next morning my limitations as an artist are enlarged upon by the



Nijinsky applying make-up to one of the corps de ballet. New York, 1916.

manager of the company with an unusual clarity and a notable absence of sentiment. The principal defects of the setting, I am made to understand, are, first, that it is too shallow—it does not allow enough space for the evolutions of the dancers—and, second, that it is not high enough to give the effect of crazy exaggeration the maestro had visualized. The first defect is remedied by the simple expedient of placing the setting farther back on the stage. The second problem is not so easily solved. After a consultation (I can never forget this half hour!) it is agreed that a piece of canvas ten feet high is to be added at the base of each of the two flats which represent the houses of the town, and that this space is to be painted with an impression of foliage in broad washes of ultramarine. The flats are strung up on the frames at the rear of the stage, and with the aid of a paint boy I elongate the trees of Braunschweig, trying in vain to ignore the audible disapproval of the ensemble rehearsing below.

The next picture: Two days have elapsed. The première has been postponed. Again I am summoned to the maestro's presence. It is evening. Nijinsky lies in bed, *maladif*, drenched in pathos, sad as a dying prince out of a drama by Maeterlinck. The little room is crowded to suffocation with the entire ensemble of the ballet, fully dressed in the costumes of *Til Eulenspiegel*. They stare at me silently with black hatred in their faces. Now begins a scene compared to which the earlier scene in the dressing room at the Opera House seems but the remote faded echo of an old refrain. This one is good. The maestro really puts his heart into it this time. The occasion—as Robert Benchley has since said of another and quite different occasion—has all the easy informality of a prairie fire. Shoes are wrenched from the feet of the *coryphées*, necklaces are torn from their throats and shattered into fragments against the walls. Unbelievable insults are hurled at me. It is like taking the lid off hell.

This, I say to myself, is what it means to have one's back to the wall, facing a firing squad. *Have you no mercy? No mercy. . . .* This is what it means to be whipped at the triangles. *A low murmur ran through the ranks as the scarcely healed backs were laid bare for the second time to receive the lash. . . .* This is what it means to stand in the deathcart, jolting over cobblestones, on the way to the guillotine. *Along the streets the death carts rumble, hollow and harsh. . . . The murmuring of many voices, the upturning of many faces, the pressing of many footsteps in the outskirts of the crowd, so that it swells forward in a mass. . . .*

Here I am, alone and unknown, in a little room at the Biltmore Hotel, in the midst of a lurid fantasy of the Middle Ages—a fantasy of my own making—with one of the world's

greatest artists shrieking at me. There is no escape. There is no hope. This is the end. Nothing. Nowhere. Never.

Then something happens inside me. Something old and cold and ancestral rises up in me. The sense of the occasion strikes me with a kind of wry humor. As I look about me at the gaily costumed crowd I know with a definite inner conviction that this ballet will be a success. There is something about the American public, there is a quality of appreciation, a peculiarly American point of view, that even these artists, remarkable though they are, cannot yet understand. I think at this bitter moment my belief in myself as an artist is born. I will see this thing through. And then—

Another picture: A week later. The dress rehearsal of *Til Eulenspiegel* is scheduled for two o'clock in the afternoon. I enter the auditorium of the Opera House by the front door. The curtain is up. On the stage stands my setting—my setting, mine!—remote, complete, fully lighted, all glowing with jewellike blues and greens. All up and down on either side of the proscenium the great gilded boxes are filled with the dancers, dressed and painted, waiting for the ballet to begin. The circular lunette in the ceiling of the auditorium has been temporarily removed for repairs and a shaft of sunlight, pure gold, streams down across the boxes, turning the proscenium into a spectacle out of dreamland. It is exceedingly beautiful.

The boxes glitter and flame and the palaces of Braunschweig tower up out of burning blue dusk into a haze of violet and rose. A fountain of music wells up from the orchestra, a shower of sparkling notes. . . .

The torment is over. My life in the theater has begun in earnest. *Ah, light, and flame, and flowers! Ah, starry meadows beyond Orion! Ah, fields of the triplicate suns!*

The relief from the strain of the last weeks is too great. My head seems to burst. Spots and bars of gold dance before my eyes.

I faint dead away.

Now the final picture, the first performance seen from the wings. There is a bustle, a tremor, a sickening moment of suspense. The orchestra strikes up the first bars of the music. The great curtain slides upward sighing into the shadows far overhead, where half-seen electricians move along the light-bridges hung with many-colored lamps, like constellations of stars. *An astonishing congeries of forms and colors assails the eye, grotesque, impossible figments of an imagination enchained by some ludicrous nightmare, as it were, but*

engrossing and appropriate beyond belief. A species of whimsicality run riot sets before the astonished vision a medieval town that never was in any age and laves it with nocturnal blue touched with shafts of crepuscular light which illuminates the inverted cornucopia roofs of tiny houses tilted at crazy angles and suggesting for all the world sheaves of skyrocket. A wondertown in a wonderland. . . . The personages might have stepped out of some Volksbuch of the Middle Ages. But there is no suggestion of coloristic disharmony within the somber scenic frame: and the light on the figurants is magical. . . . I hear a crash of applause, fierce and frightening. The little figure in green begins its leapings and laughings. There is the scene of wild love-making, the confutation of the scholars, the strange solo dance, swift as the flash of a rapier, the hanging of the corpse on the gibbet—and last of all, the apparition of the ghost shooting upward through a foam of tiny lanterns, like a moth veering above a sea of fireflies. . . . Then the triumph, and the cheering, like the clamor of great bells—now rapturous, now softening, melting—and the mountains of flowers, and the curtain calls that seem never to end. Nijinsky and I bow together, hand in hand. He is all smiles. As the curtain sweeps upward for the last time he murmurs once more, “C’est vraiment très, très heureux.”

I go home. I am finished with it all.

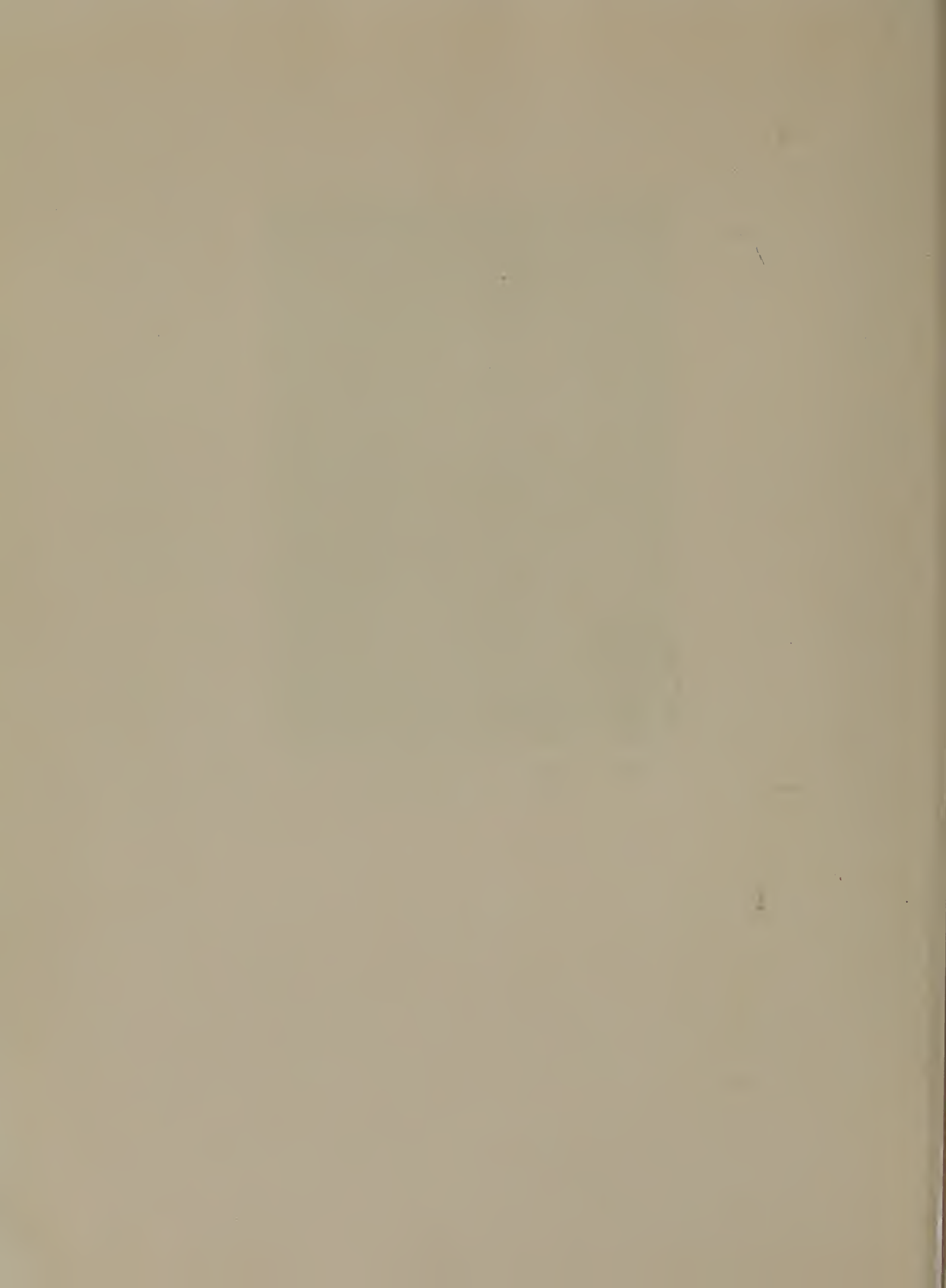
I never see him again.

Now my story is ended and these memories fade into the past. The great artist who taught me so much now exists apart, away from us, in a sad world of his own. I dwell for the last time upon my strange, magical, shattering experience and remember once more what it has meant to me in the years that have passed since the creation of *Til Eulenspiegel*. It has given me a heightened and broadened sense of life. It has taught me to be true to my own inner dream, to live by this dream, and never to betray it.

And it has taught me, I hope, to be kind.



Til Eulenspiegel. 15th Century German Woodcut.
Collection of Joseph Cornell.



APPENDICES

NOTE ON NIJINSKY AND ROBERT EDMOND JONES

BY STARK YOUNG

FOR WEEKS once in London I saw every performance that the company of the Russian Ballet gave. They had not been very long out of Russia then and were at their peak. Diaghilev's hand was on everything, and there was a completeness, a unity, a varied singleness of perfection in the case of each production, or shall we say composition, or performance, that I had never seen before and have never seen since. From all that brilliant assemblage the figure, of course, who stood out most was Nijinsky. I have in my time seen a few, a very few, artists of the theater who were more profound, more infinitely human, and more tragic to the heart and mind, but I have never seen any other artist so varied in his compulsion, so absorbing in his variety, so glamorous in his stage presence as was Nijinsky.

From time to time I have been tempted to write of Nijinsky and have been invited to do so, but it has seemed to me that lacking his presence all the words I could conjure up would be more or less futile and would resolve themselves into a mass and aspect of gush not unlike our grandfathers' critics when they spoke of their great sopranos. It is amazing to see how Mr. Jones has avoided that pitfall.

The article by Mr. Jones seems to me notable for several reasons. In the first place, it is an account of Nijinsky under quite a different guise from that in which I saw him, when he was protected by Diaghilev, shielded from every intrusion, directed, instructed, perfected, and guarded as no other artist I ever heard of has been. When Mr. Jones worked with Nijinsky he dealt with a great artist who was acting also as maestro. The whole situation thus becomes enormously different. This difference has a significant bearing not only on the ballet that Mr. Jones records but on the nature of art itself, and the article is therefore doubly important.

There must be few people indeed who know anything about our theater who do not consider Mr. Robert Edmond Jones not only the first and leading figure in the history of its décor, but also its most fecundative and luminous mind and spirit. The article is, therefore, not only an account of the great artist that Nijinsky was but of the first wings and certainty of a fine artist of our own.

THE STRANGENESS OF TIL

BY H. T. PARKER

NECESSARILY a mimed tale, so full and various of action and suggestion as is Mr. Nijinsky's choreographic fable, can leave but confused impression in a single seeing. First of all, it was plain last evening that Strauss's rondo of like title is no more than background to the whole, like Debussy's music in the mimed episode of the faun or Schumann's among the fancies of *Butterflies*. Once and again it rhythmized the dancers and mimes as in the passage that celebrates Til's love-making; here and there the acute intelligence and the ingenious invention of Mr. Nijinsky gave a musical turn to the action as when the learned pedants answer the jeers of Til in a kind of scholarly counterpoint. Momentarily, too, the accent of this action was the accent of the music; but usually Strauss's tone-poem was no more than background to the illusion even as was Mr. Jones's decoration. In the dim distance was the shadowy portal of a medieval cathedral, as it might be in Til's own Braunschweig. Around it in pure fantasy were topsy-turvy pinnacles of a medieval town, gabled roofs, turrets, chimney pots, dormered windows as cracked and tumbled and out of all normal semblance as the wits and the pranks of Eulenspiegel himself.

So Mr. Jones construes into decoration the ancient folk tale and the modern German tone-poem. Even more fortunately and persuasively has he lavished upon the costumes his wit, fancy, readiness of design, zest for color. Peaked headdresses, comparable in height in their kind with Tamar's tower, were poised upon the heads of the opulent dames of the haute bourgeoisie. Trains of rich stuffs trailed ten yards behind them in the flaunted splendor of "position." The pedantic professors were ludicrous to see in shovel hats that were longer even than Don Basilio's in *The Barber*, with their scrolls of learning tucked under their arms, with their black soutanes billowing to their pompous gait. As black under their peaked caps, with white crosses flaring at their backs, were the Inquisitors, fond and foolish men, who sent Til to the gallows because he mocked at things as they are and upset the precious proprieties. To and fro among the august ladies, the learned, the bench, the rich possessors generally, went the rabble that trailed wondering and elated at the heels of Til. Coarse stuffs, dull colored and rudely caught together, covered them. As often as not back and sides, as in the old ballad, went bare. Greasy were their caps; slovenly was their mien. As night descended upon the "public place" where the action occurred, they were alternately somber figures of shadow or lurid figures of passing gleam. Usually, as the eye looked upon the stage, the illusion was of the swiftly turning pages of a

medieval chronicle from the brushes of an illuminator who served equally wit, fancy, and the verities.

That action, more than once enriched or modulated by Mr. Nijinsky's fertile invention, followed in the main the suggestions that the imaginations of men, primed with the fact and the legend of Til, have found in Strauss's tone-poem. The introductory measures set the scene, as it were, with the haute bourgeoisie, descending stately from its mansions; with the rabble streaming up from its alleys. Til opened wide the bread vendor's basket; and the hungry were fed. Til pranced and leered about the highly respectable and highly self-conscious dames with his parodies of courtly coquetry. Til made the professors the mock of their own pedantry. Out of his long mantle, as Mr. Nijinsky swung the folds, peered ever the cloven hoof of his derision. Out of his eyes, in Mr. Nijinsky's astute and graphic miming, shone the elation of him that scores merrily off the truly good. His very steps, as Mr. Nijinsky danced them, were as the tracing of his mockery.

So far Strauss, the attributed program to his rondo, the evergreen traditions of the "merry pranks" that the composer has sent from Bavaria world-wide. Then, for climax, the wry, the comic, the modern rather than medieval, the finely touched and the finely stimulating invention of Mr. Nijinsky himself. Nightfall comes; the respectable are at home and abed; only the rabble, fed, happy, elated, intoxicated with the happenings of Til's afternoon, haunt the square. Regardless of what Strauss's music may or may not imply, heedless of the tradition that the radical Nijinsky has thrown to the winds, they acclaim and enthrone him as their deliverer. On the shoulders of the mob sits Til, enthroned, the sovereign of the wit that brings freedom, of the mockery that sends conventions and hypocrisies toppling down. Respectable Braunschweig and disregarded Strauss may endure no more. Into the "public place" troop the Inquisitors; back to Til's trial and hanging comes the tone-poem. Then and there he is strung up—red light of warning. But no sooner are the executioners gone than he springs anew into being, the perpetual being of the humor that bursts sham, the jeer that pricks pretension. Wistfully, prophetically—to Strauss's epilogue—the rabble eyes a perennial miracle. In fine, a mimodrama—to return to that exceedingly elastic category—like no other in the Russian repertoire; that courts a certain verity of illusion of time, place, and circumstance; yet is impregnated with an everlasting symbolism; that under medieval guise masks intensely contemporary ideas; that takes its text from Strauss's music and from the folk tale of Til and leaves Mr. Nijinsky thereon to preach the sermon; that fills the eye with pictorial illusions; the imagination with thick-coming fancies; the mind with thoughts that twinge. It is the handiwork of an intellect, invention, and fancy that shows Mr. Nijinsky more than the master dancer of his time; that offers a new and fruitful field to mimodrama; it confirms the distinction that marks the Russian Ballet as one of the driving artistic forces of our time. To an eighth art almost, it goes forward.

THE DRAWINGS OF NIJINSKY

BY MARSDEN HARTLEY

READING the book of Romola Nijinsky on Nijinsky and that of Arnold Haskell on Balletomania, one covers pretty much the whole range of dancing up to the time of the present which is the era of Massine and Lifar, and all those other new ones who would doubtless sniff at these, to them, old-fashioned names. It was, I must now suppose, curiosity that led me to see all the great dancers of the last schools, as it was certainly a natural dislike for this sort of expression that permitted me to sniff at the great Isadora, and therefore miss her at her best moments, but such is the case, and I missed out on Isadora.

I saw all the great dancers of the academic past, Pavlova, Karsavina, Fokine, Nijinsky, Bolm, all the way down to the wax-doll perfection of Adeline Genée of whom there is a surprising present-day replica in the appearance of the great skater, Sonia Henie, and there was great charm in Genée, who retired to become the wife of a presumably rich civilian and seems never to have appeared again.

A few years ago Mme. Nijinsky held an exhibition in a new gallery at the top of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, and which was chiefly and for obvious reasons a record of the pathological condition of this artist after he had crossed the strange meridian of schizophrenia, and the tragic reaching too far, or was he perhaps driven too far toward the precipice of irrelevant interests, and being peasant, knew nothing of the vast areas into which the mind may be plunged, and left gasping there? Romola Nijinsky records the last conscious states of her husband with a vivid sense of their reality, where in some hall in Switzerland, perhaps at Davos, the dancer was determined to perform the "greatest of all dances," and the title, typical enough for a going mind, the dance of "Le Mariage avec Dieu."

All this sort of thing is pretty much known now and all of us talk of it as glibly as if it had always been everyday language, and while of course the conditions themselves have always been, it is only during the last twenty-five years or so that we have been provided with glib phrases to cover it, even to a recent criticism of the Poems of Mallarmé, where little else than the Freudian was spoken of, more than a little dull, some of us thought, since Mallarmé was a poet to be talked of, as poet. But in the Nijinsky case there is nothing else to do, because the basis of the drawings is entirely created by this condition of split personality, and since both Freud and Jung have seen and commented on these drawings, we would sort of like to know what they said, but I do not seem to recall finding just that in the Romola Nijinsky book.



A Drawing by Nijinsky. 1919.

But if we take "Le Mariage avec Dieu" to begin with, we shall see the whole thing in these drawings as they progress from stage to stage, from the vague and useless beginnings where curved lines are used to the point of monotony, and the figure of the female appears, no vital contact with the female principle being remarked. It is not the expression of a male thinking solely and passionately about the female or a female, as it is hardly likely what Nijinsky was to be doing, for he was by nature an abstract artist, even though he was not an intellectual one.

At all events, these drawings are psychopathic charts and that is all that can be said of them, for they are almost entirely without merit, that is to say esthetic merit. They are not creations of the vibrant living imagination; they are records of a mind wandering through the corridors of the where to the black abysses of the nowhere.

And these drawings are singular and entertainingly innocent; for since Nijinsky must have been just a natural clean little boy, he didn't get caught up with decadent symbols, and of this there is absolutely nothing in these drawings of his.

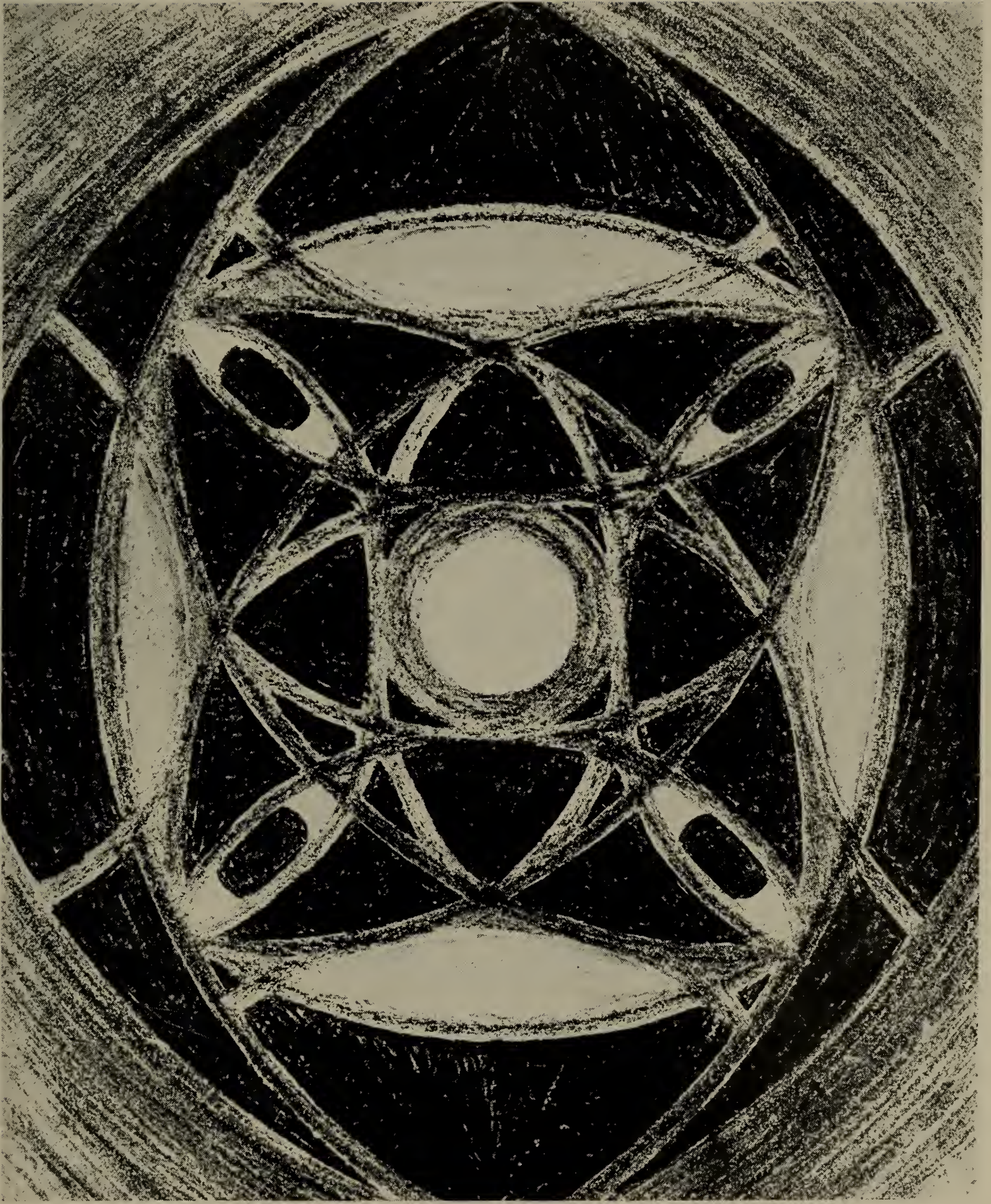
It is as if no record at all were made of the period previous to his meeting with Diaghilev, so that the first series of drawings are of the rhythms of the feminine idea, and the last two are the black pantherlike spirit that pursued him and plunged him over the precipice of knowing all to knowing nothing.

There is no doubt whatever but that Diaghilev was the creator of Nijinsky as he was of all the others that came into contact with him and enlisted or aroused his interests. He could look at them and in the instant know what sort of a dancer he could or would make of them, and if the imagination of Diaghilev was dark-ghoulish, as why shouldn't it be thought of that way, since he felt the need of expressing glory and luxury on such vast scales, he was "dark" himself, and sought the excitement of the artifices for his light.

These drawings of Nijinsky are free of all the common forms of pornographic indulgence. There is no trace that this sort of thing ever played a role in his consciousness, certainly not from the drawings.

And if the demon in pursuit which figures as the fearful design in the last two series of drawings is far more powerful than the attempt to find out the place of the feminine principle in his nature, it is because when the mind, being driven to desperation by his attempts to fulfill the common offices of life, began to break, it is perfectly natural that the image in the drawing should be that of the image that attempted to destroy him, and what other image could that be, but that of the one who had put the halo of glory about his being, and set him among the clouds that were burning with sunset fire—who could that have been save the thing he feared in Diaghilev, if not, let's say for decency's sake, Diaghilev himself?

The great Russian ballet director was a powerful hypnotist. He was something of a performer of the occult trick; he took handfuls of diamonds out of coal pockets; he took rubies out of pools of blood, he took sapphires out of the crowded places among the constellations, he took black out of despair,



Water color by Nijinsky. 1922.

red out of the body of physical lusts; and if he took white to any extent, he had to have plenty of the corroding rays of the moon upon it. The very look of Diaghilev's own eye in a common photo shows that he played with fires of which he was in one way no master, and in another way with which he played too much and too dangerously.

Black magic is one of the elements of everyday life, and gods help the individual and I am not putting on the occult "dog" here because I know almost nothing at all about it, but it is the language of these drawings of Nijinsky and by the drawings alone one can easily frame a perfect sense of the last conscious image in Nijinsky's mind before the split, and it is perfectly natural that it should be God. It was a kind of primitive offering on the part of the dancer in this case, to identify himself with the maker of his pitiable dreams.

And it is not the eye of God that appears in the drawings one after another, in the latter series; it is the eye of the dreaded pursuing demon, and all obviously has to do with the instant of the entrance of woman into the dancer's life, and the rage in the forest of the demon whose nostrils were spitting sulphuric fires.

The later drawings are in a sort of sticky water color and have for the moment more life, and it swings me back once again to the more direct and vital image that was living in the brain at the time of the disintegration, and it was not the woman who was the great symbol.

These drawings of the last period are mostly in ink and the white of the paper, and here are the beginnings of the two principles at war, and the third which is so telling is the spot of red which appears, which is like the blood spitting of some enraged and outraged demon.

Then the red spot disappears, and the struggle is over, and it is as if you see the eye of the mind closing as you watch, and it is an eye in each case, and in each last drawing the eye seems to grow tighter and tighter, and then the vision is sealed, nothing more is seen.

There is no such vast drama in this life as was involved in the case of Van Gogh, and no such esthetic burning, for the mental problem is entirely different, and in a sense Nijinsky was more fortunate; for Van Gogh's tragic suffering lay in the fact that he was obliged to vacillate between states of clarity and states of sheer insanity, and he himself could not know when the attack would come, all the more distracting since he knew when the states were coming on, he could tell his doctors just what was to happen and seem to follow the condition sort of half sanely even while he was progressing toward insanity, so that the suffering in the soul was infinitely greater, for at least Nijinsky was totally oblivious to all that side of things and was therefore freed of the misery.

Only yesterday in the morning paper we read that Nijinsky is well on the way to a possible recovery, that he is able to drive his car around the park where he is, and seems otherwise on the way toward rationality, but a condition is made—he seems to think that the war is still going on, and Walter Winchell's flip remark in the morning paper is extremely apropos: "After all, what a sane man."

If Nijinsky comes really out of his mental dilemma, it would be interesting to know just what he

is able to make of the past, if he can recall where he left off, if he can record some of the stages during the past years and of what they meant to him, or is he to begin like a child again, as if he has just been born, in which case what sort of infantilism will it be? At all events, the drawings of Nijinsky are essentially psychopathic in their value, and are romantic charts merely of the closing down of his mind.



Nijinsky and his wife in his car. London, February, 1917.



Nijinsky backstage after performance of *Petrouchka*, with Karsavina and Diaghilev. Lipnitzki, Paris, 1927.

NOTE ON NIJINSKY LETTER

I WOULD not see Nijinsky again. At the beginning of June, absent from Paris, I wrote him inviting him to hear *Parsifal* with me, the première of which was to take place several days later at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. But he received my letter in Madrid, from where he would leave for Vienna with the Ballets Russes. Then came the general dispersion. During the war we exchanged several letters, and here is the last that I received from him, in 1918. I transcribe it textually, to show to what a degree Nijinsky, by pure will power, had perfected himself in the French language—he who had not known a single word when he arrived for the first time in Paris (1909), where he never stayed longer than two or three months at most, and where he spoke all day in Russian with the people of his entourage.

LETTER FROM NIJINSKY TO REYNALDO HAHN

I WAS very happy to get your news and to learn that you are behaving yourself, and haven't forgotten me. . . . During all these past years I have kept my friendship for you. Your artistic projects and your ideas for ballets interest me very much; I hope soon I may really get to understand them. I work, I compose new dances, and I am perfecting the system of dance-notation, which I have invented in these last years. I am very happy to have found this notation, which for centuries has been searched for, because I believe, and I am sure, my dear friend, you will agree, that this notation is indispensable for the development of the art of the dance. It is a simple and logical means to note down movements. In a word, this system will provide the same service for the artists of the dance that musical notes give to musicians. I shall be very happy to show it to you, and learn your opinion of this work.

I never got the letter which you sent me two years ago. You doubtless know I was interned for eighteen months, with my family in Austria-Hungary. [As a Russian citizen, Nijinsky was considered an enemy alien, although married to a Hungarian.] We passed through many privations and difficulties. After that we went to North America, where I danced. At present, I am living here [St. Moritz, Switzerland] in order to compose a program quietly. I wish to work independently of other troupes of dancers, in which intrigue prevents the creation of real art. I am planning to dance alone with a small company and achieve some interesting results.

I hope that you will have everything to make you happy, I remain your devoted friend,

VASLAV NIJINSKY

(*Figaro*, April 6, 1939.)

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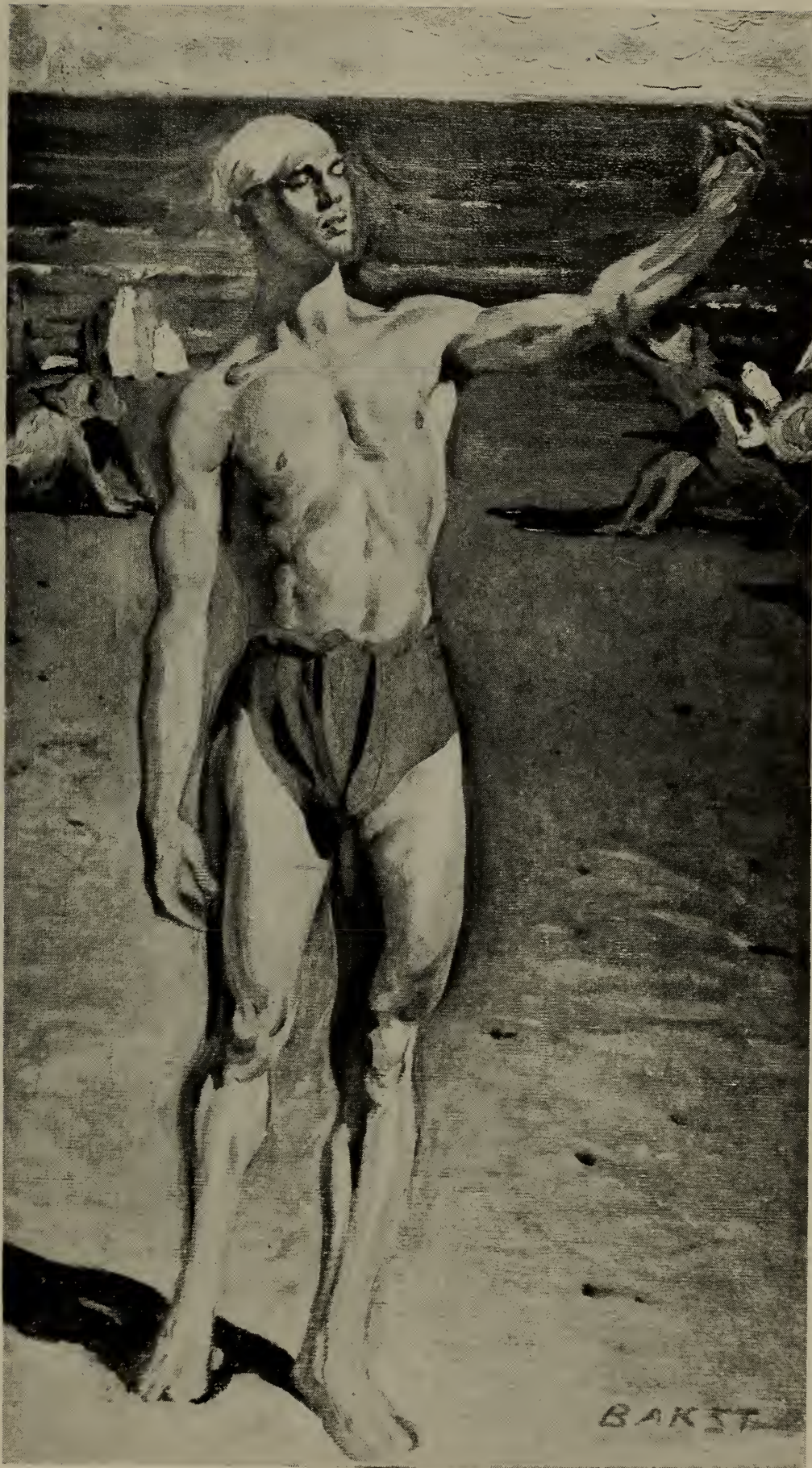
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